THE Nation.

WILL OBAMA PASS THE WAITRESS TEST?
Connie Schultz

McCAIN'S VOODOO REFORMISM
Ari Berman

THE WHITE WHALE
E.L. Doctorow

CENTRAL INCOMPETENCE AGENCY
Spencer Ackerman

# THE SUBPRIME SWINDLE

## HOW BANKS STOLE BLACK AMERICA'S FUTURE

KAI WRIGHT

JULY 14, 2008
www.thenation.com

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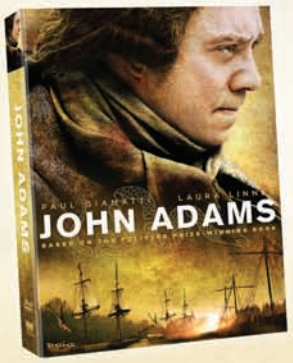
"★★★★"
—NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

"MAGNIFICENT"
—WALL STREET JOURNAL

"GRIPPING... ONE OF THE MOST COMPELLING MINISERIES OF THE DECADE"
—BALTIMORE SUN

"A MASTERPIECE"
—REUTERS

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# Letters

THE Nation.
LABOR'S CIVIL WARS Esther Kaplan
LAWRENCE LESSIG, ANTI-CORRUPTION CRUSADER Christopher Hayes
BACK TALK: BILLY BRAGG
WHO'LL UNPLUG BIG MEDIA? STAY TUNED
ROBERT McCHESNEY & JOHN NICHOLS

## Media Vampires of Sodom

Seattle
Having just unplugged my Comcast cable, I read the headline on the June 16 issue ["Who'll Unplug Big Media?"] and said, "*I* will!"
Kim Loftness

## Tain't Funny McGee: Part Deux

Boston
I find Robert Grossman's June 16 "Comix Nation" disgusting, obnoxious, repellent, repugnant, useless worthless nonsense and—back to the beginning of the alphabet—CRAP!
Harriett F. Goodman

North Hollywood, Calif.
Harsh criticism is an inevitable accompaniment to partisan politics, so it's not shocking that *The Nation* has tossed rhetorical brickbats Hillary Clinton's way while covering Barack Obama with big, wet editorial kisses. This is, after all, a journal of opinion. But your odious cartoon goes far beyond advocacy deep into the realm of hateful, paranoia-fueled extremism. This thirty-year subscriber has had enough and canceled his subscription.
Henry Sheehan

New York City
I didn't find the cartoon funny; in fact, I found it kind of slanderous. Since *The Nation* endorsed Obama in the primaries, a cartoon that would otherwise look merely sophomoric, unhumorous and just the view of one person looks more like an editorial. It doesn't make my job—persuading Hillary supporters we should all come together—any easier.
Katha Pollitt

## Grossman Replies

New York City
Hillary brought up the RFK assassination more than once, which was widely noticed and commented on. Without that there would have been no cartoon.
Robert Grossman

letters@thenation.com

## Obama Is Us

Longmont, Colo.
In her June 16 column Patricia J. Williams quotes GOP strategist Roger Stone saying in *The New Yorker*, "Are you black? Are you Hispanic? Are you gay? [If not,] then why the fuck are you a Democrat? You should be with us." Stooping to Stone's level, I'd respond: "Are you black? Are you Hispanic? Are you gay? Are you a woman? Are you poor? Are you middle class? Do you care about other people? the environment? Then why the fuck are you a Republican? You should be with us." Barack Obama represents the closest thing we've had to "us" in a long time in a presidential candidate. Let's make sure "they" (the corporate elite and the warmongers) don't get their hands on our White House again.
Luc Nadeau

## Nurses: Can't Live Without 'Em

College Place, Wash.
I can't speak to Esther Kaplan's other examples, but I know firsthand that she is flat-out wrong to cite the deal our union negotiated allowing us to organize Oregon nursing home workers as a capitulation to management or abandonment of staffing goals ["Labor's Growing Pains," June 16]. It is precisely the opposite. As a certified nurse's aide and a proud member of SEIU Local 503, I can tell you that our efforts led to a 30 percent improvement in nursing home staffing requirements in Oregon. Until last year the ratio of nurse's aides to residents on day shift was 1 to 10. By next year that will be reduced to 1 to 7 under the state regulations we won.

We have also increased the number of unionized Oregon nursing homes from two in 2002 to twenty-three today. This has allowed us to bargain contracts that increased the starting wage for CNAs at my facility from $9.25/hour in 2004 to $12.80/hour in 2010. Just as important, we have won respect and a voice in how our

*(continued on page 32)*

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# A Subprime Bailout

As we go to press, a sense of urgency about the nation's housing catastrophe seems finally to have trickled up to Congress, which is making a rare bipartisan push before the July 4 recess to pass a relief measure aimed at homeowners. It's about time. As early as 2003, reality-inclined economists sounded the alarm over the hyperinflated housing bubble's impending burst. But it wasn't until Wall Street took a hit last year—threatening a worldwide financial meltdown—that the government swung into action, and then only to bail out the lenders and banks that got us into this mess. Meanwhile, more than 1.1 million homes are in foreclosure, and housing prices have taken a 15.3 percent tumble over the past year—the worst drop in history—sticking almost 9 million Americans with homes worth less than their mortgages. In cities like Detroit and Las Vegas, whole neighborhoods are ghost towns, with more houses boarded up than occupied.

EDITORIAL

Yet free market ideologues have stymied relief efforts by claiming that to rescue homeowners would be to reward speculators who lied on their mortgage applications to make a fast buck. No equivalent amount of tough love was offered to the really reckless speculators—the bankers who bundled subprime loans and traditional mortgages into securities and traded them to third-party investors on the deregulated global market. This quest to maximize paper profits drove the mortgage industry to make shoddy loans to first-time buyers as well as longtime homeowners, who were lured into exploding-interest-rate mortgages they couldn't afford or did not need. What happened, in short, was not consumer error but systemic market fraud and failure.

The people suffering most from this scheme's collapse are not members of the investor class but folks who believed that homeownership would be their ticket to middle-class stability, as it had been for the previous generation. As Kai Wright's article "The Subprime Swindle," on page 11, reveals, the gutting of the American dream of homeownership has disproportionately devastated minorities; the total loss of wealth for people of color due to the subprime crisis could reach $213 billion, including $92 billion for African-Americans and $98 billion for Latinos. And, because minority wealth is so dependent on home equity, the crush of foreclosures represents not just the immediate loss of homes but the razing of wealth and opportunity for generations to come.

For Americans who have already had their meager economic security eviscerated, Congress's awakening is too late, and for those on the cusp, it is still too little. The pending legislation, which Bush has threatened to veto, creates a refinancing system that is voluntary for lenders and hamstrung by large borrower's fees and red tape. It does nothing to reform the securities market, opting instead for borrower counseling and stricter disclosure requirements. But such tinkering around the edges will not fix this disaster. What is needed is a massive federal program, akin to the Resolution Trust Corporation but designed to aid debtors instead of creditors, to keep low-income Americans in their homes. Houses in default could be placed into federal receivership in which owners would make payments equivalent to rent without accruing equity. When the market settles, these mortgages could be renegotiated at fair rates, or the homes could be turned into public housing. Finally, lenders must be held accountable for the loans they make, not just now in the ensuing sell-off but permanently, by extending liability throughout the chain so that everyone who issues or holds a mortgage has a reason to make sure that the housing market is built on a strong foundation.

**Page 38**: The American way of spying

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## This week @thenation.com

**NEWS & ANALYSIS**

John Nichols on George Carlin

Jeff Kisseloff on Eliot Asinof

Barbara Ehrenreich on liposuction

Michael Connery on Rock the Vote

**RADIO NATION**

Tom Engelhardt

**VIDEO NATION**

Video: Pete Seeger and Majora Carter

**AROUND THE NATION**

Post your event

# The Waitress Test

Now that Hillary Clinton is out of the presidential race, the hand-wringing has begun over what will happen to all those working-class women who supported her.

First, let's ask the right question. Which working-class women do we mean?

Those of us who come from these homes, these neighborhoods, have always known what pollsters are finding out: blue-collar women are not a monolithic group. They proved this in the primary election and will likely demonstrate it again in November. Whether this is good news or bad for Barack Obama depends on whether he can convince a lot of older white women living paycheck to paycheck that he's the guy who understands why they're so scared—and is the one who can do something about it.

COMMENT

As with virtually every other demographic group except African-Americans, who voted overwhelmingly for him, the support for Obama's candidacy among white working-class women fell along generational lines. Exit polls indicate that the majority of younger blue-collar voters were for him. Older white women went for Hillary, but that doesn't mean they will automatically vote for the Democrat in the fall. They supported Hillary in large part because she did not push too hard against their comfort zone. She looked like them and, often, sounded like them, particularly when she talked about single mothers without healthcare and waitresses working two and three shifts just to get by.

They don't feel respected, and so attacks against Clinton resonated for a lot of them. These are women who take care of their kids, their husbands and their parents and stretch household budgets from thin to translucent, but as soon as their breasts start to droop and their tummies poof out they go from sex objects to invisible. From their perspective, they've worked harder than anybody had the right to expect and now nobody has any use for them. But Hillary Clinton? Now, there was a postmenopausal woman who refused to disappear.

For a lot of these women, Obama is a challenge. They may be comfortable with his policy agenda, but he is one odd duck in their pond. Much of that has to do with age. Theirs, not his. Which means it's really about race.

As one pollster who has made a career of studying working-class voters told me, "It really boils down to when you graduated from high school, whether you graduated before or after 1971. The question is, Did you go to an integrated high school? After 1971, the answer is likely yes, which is why so many young voters say, We're not uptight about race. But here's what you hear from older voters in focus groups all the time. They'll say, I go back to my high school now and it's all black. That usually means about a third are black, but these people went to high school when everybody was white. To them, everything has changed."

Kitchen table issues also loom large for these voters. "This is not some *Sex and the City* group," said another pollster who studies voting trends among women. "If you are a working-class woman, you are one paycheck or one Social Security

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# Noted.

**DOLEFUL DOLLARS:** **Barack Obama**'s decision to forgo public financing for his presidential campaign is at once understandable and unfortunate. Obama's low estimation of a system plagued by loopholes, lobbyists and smear-ready 527s is appropriate—"public financing…is broken, and we face opponents who have become masters at gaming this system," he explained. There is a clear strategic rationale for employing his $168 million fundraising advantage to beat **John McCain** in November. Obama has pledged to overhaul the system once he reaches the White House—his support for the Fair Elections Now Act in the Senate shows a commitment to this issue—and though it's a bitter pill to swallow, some campaign finance reformers are giving him the benefit of the doubt. "His decision today is not one that furthers reform in the short run," read a statement from the **Public Campaign Action Fund**, but Obama "now has a special obligation to make passage of comprehensive public financing of all federal elections a priority if elected."

Others are less sanguine, like Senate colleague and staunch reformer **Russ Feingold**, who said flatly, "This is not a good decision." Obama made an early vow to work within the system, and the campaign promised to "aggressively pursue an agreement with the Republican nominee to preserve a publicly financed general election." His change of heart rightly raises questions about his commitment to a politics free from special interests.

Although Obama speaks of a "grassroots movement of over 1.5 million Americans" that has "fueled this campaign with donations of $5, $10, $20," the truth is, his campaign is largely reliant on corporate millions and at times has been misleadingly vague about its donor base. In a February debate, Obama claimed, "We have now raised 90 percent of our donations from small donors," a figure his campaign reiterated after the public financing decision.

In fact, 90 percent of the contributions have been in small amounts, but a majority (55 percent) of the money raised has come from large donations. By the end of May, Obama had received nearly $20 million from the finance, insurance and real estate sectors, according to the **Center for Responsive Politics**, 50 percent more than his Republican rival. Commercial banks, pharmaceutical companies, hedge funds and private-equity firms have all given significantly more to Obama than McCain. Of Obama's top twenty donors, six are major Wall Street investment houses and five are corporate law firms. **Goldman Sachs** tops the list.

Obama's decision to pass on public funds for private dollars gives him a financial advantage heading into his showdown with McCain, but at what cost remains unclear. Obama's "army" of small donors is impressive, but so is the backing he enjoys from Wall Street. "This presidential election is going to set all-time records for spending," says the reform organization **Public Citizen**. "[We] can only hope that, despite Sen. Obama's decision, he will remain disgusted with private interests buying our White House and that after the campaign, he will lead the charge for a system that removes special interest money from politics."

**FUNNY BONES OF CONTENTION:** **George Carlin**, who was jailed briefly in Milwaukee for uttering the "seven words you can never say on television" during a 1972 performance, understood that words could never be so obscene as wars, poverty and injustice. To the end Carlin, who died June 22 at 71, challenged a corrupt status quo and its perversions of language. Countering **George Bush**'s claim that his "war on terror" was a battle for freedom, Carlin asked, "Well, if crime fighters fight crime and fire fighters fight fire, what do freedom fighters fight?"

But Carlin spent little time fretting about Bush, his old nemesis **Ronald Reagan** or his even older nemesis **Richard Nixon**. He kept winning Grammys, writing bestsellers and packing halls with a savage critique of religious, governmental and economic elites. "The real owners are the big wealthy business interests that control things and make all the important decisions," Carlin once said. "Forget the politicians; they're an irrelevancy. The politicians are put there to give you the idea that you have freedom of choice. You don't. You have no choice. You have owners. They own you. They own everything. They own all the important land. They own and control the corporations. They've long since bought and paid for the Senate, the Congress, the statehouses, the city halls. They've got the judges in their back pockets. And they own all the big media companies, so that they control just about all of the news and information you hear. They've got you by the balls. They spend billions of dollars every year lobbying—lobbying to get what they want. Well, we know what they want; they want more for themselves and less for everybody else."

The pundits say there is no audience for the old-school populism of a **William Jennings Bryan** or even a **Franklin Roosevelt**. Carlin proved them wrong, preaching American radicalism with punch lines every night before crowds that cheered (and laughed) as he struck mighty blows against the empire. JOHN NICHOLS

**TRANS ACTION:** On June 26 the House Subcommittee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions is holding the first-ever Congressional hearing on transgender issues. This historic hearing follows the passage of a hate-crimes bill last September that included gender-identity protections, and will take up concerns left unaddressed by a recent antidiscrimination bill that split the LGBT community. Although almost all LGBT groups advocated the inclusion of transgender people in the 2007 Employment Non-Discrimination Act, openly gay Representative Barney Frank and the powerful lobby group **Human Rights Campaign** settled for a version of the bill that left out gender identity, outraging advocates like **Lambda Legal** and the **National Center for Transgender Equality** (NCTE). House Speaker **Nancy Pelosi** expressed regret but backed Frank's bill because it had "the best prospects for success on the House floor," where it passed before stalling in the Senate.

The June 26 hearing will be an opportunity to push for a better bill in 2008—or, more likely, after Bush relinquishes his veto pen. **Kyle Boyer** of the NCTE calls it a "fact finding hearing meant to educate Congress." He hopes it will be "helpful in the long run at advancing the passage of an Employment Non-Discrimination Act that we can all support." NAOMI SOBEL

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check away from financial disaster. The government safety net is so important to you in a profoundly personal way."

Women with families know that rising gas prices mean higher grocery bills, too, and when a third or more of their income already goes to feeding the family, that's a whole new level of pain. The economic stress is also stoking other problems that were always there—particularly drug and alcohol addiction and domestic violence. Pollsters say those issues are coming up more often in focus groups with working-class women. More husbands are hitting the kids and beating their wives, and the way many of these husbands resolve their anger is to walk away—for good. And they take their paychecks with them. Food bank directors across the Midwest tell me that's one of the reasons a growing number of women are showing up for free groceries.

"That's not something you find out with exit polling," one pollster said. "That's what you find out when you put a group of women in a room and tell them you really want to hear what's happening in their lives."

For older white working-class women who are married, that talk often turns to the emasculation of the men they love. These are families who were raised with traditional notions of what it means to be a man, and we saw the impact of this upbringing all across Ohio in the 2006 race. Over and over, men who used to work in factories that are now closed spoke, often with choked voices, about how they had failed as husbands and as providers because of lost jobs and reduced wages. Bitterly, they described how their wives, and sometimes their grown children, had to get jobs so the family could survive.

When spoken to separately, the wives were just as emotional—not for themselves but for the men they loved. Women often dabbed their eyes and touched the shoulders of other wives who described the heartbreak of watching their husbands crumble. When it comes to jobs and trade, many of these women wouldn't care if the next President was bright orange with purple hair if he could bring back the light in their husbands' eyes.

What does Barack Obama have to say to working-class women? Plenty. But they're used to being talked at, especially by men. The guy who proves he's willing to listen and then offer real-life solutions to their all-too-real problems is the guy who will get their votes.

My mother, who was an hourly wage earner until she died, always said to her daughters, "Don't marry him until you see how he treats the waitress."

She was talking about picking a husband, but it's a good test for picking a President, too, and one likely to be used this year by working-class women of every age. CONNIE SCHULTZ

*Connie Schultz is a columnist at the* Plain Dealer *in Cleveland and author of* …and His Lovely Wife, *a memoir about her husband Sherrod Brown's successful 2006 race for the Senate.*

## Calvin Trillin, Deadline Poet

### A Smear-cheer for Michelle Obama

(*As performed by the Swiftboat Singers*)

Who's not a retiring, shy Southern belle?
Whose Harvard degree is the way you can tell
That she's so elite she once ate a morel?
Who doesn't wear flag pins in either lapel?
Michelle.
Rah! Rah! Smear! Rah! Rah!

Who might be a part of a terrorist cell?
Who might have the powers for casting a spell?
Whose fist-knocks may summon the devil from hell?
Who could be, we reckon, a Muslim as well?
Michelle.
Rah! Rah! Smear! Rah! Rah!

# Getting Pakistan Wrong

*Islamabad*

Weeks after US missiles killed eleven Pakistani soldiers on the Afghan border, the air is still thick with recrimination. The United States insists its men were ambushed by the Taliban inside Afghanistan and fired back in "self-defense." Pakistan says that even though the army's border positions were known, the Americans fired in a "cowardly and unprovoked…act of aggression."

COMMENT

The acrimony deepened with comments by Gen. Dan McNeil, retiring commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan. On June 15 he questioned the loyalty of the Frontier Corps, the paramilitary force that guards the border. The dead FC soldiers "were pretty much tribals themselves," he said, referring to the fact that they came from the same Pashtun kith as the Taliban. Does that mean they were legitimate targets? They may become so. The border skirmish was bound to happen. It was a result of two colliding views over how to tackle the Taliban and its Al Qaeda cohort ensconced in Pakistan's lethal borderlands.

There is no dispute about the task's urgency. Many in Pakistan accept that the Taliban represents a grave threat to the state's sovereignty. And George W. Bush has marked the Pakistan-Afghan border as the most dangerous place on earth, where "Al Qaeda has established safe havens and is plotting attacks against the United States." The dispute is about means. Bush believes the Taliban and Al Qaeda must be destroyed by war, akin to the counterinsurgency now raking through southern Afghanistan. The new Pakistani government says war has failed and peace must be tried, at least with the Taliban.

Until parliamentary elections in February, the military regime under Gen. Pervez Musharraf pursued a US-minted policy in the tribal areas, where might was applied in exchange for American largesse (at least $10 billion since 9/11, overwhelmingly paid to the army). The policy was a disaster. Not only did

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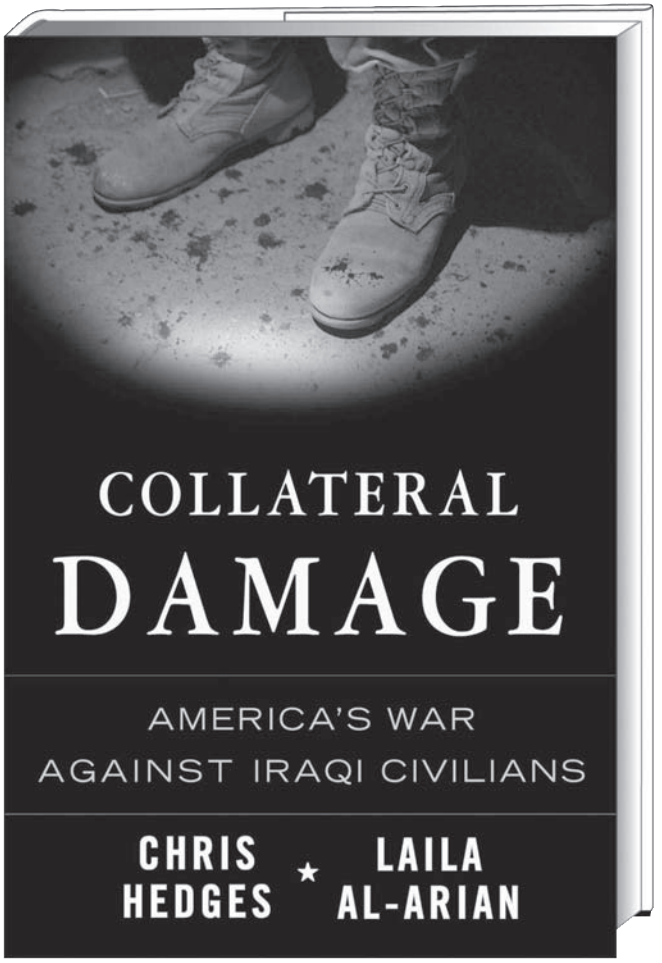
# A First Hand Account of America's War Against Iraqi Citizens

**"[An] important new book."**
***—AmericanChronicle.com***

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---

**From *Collateral Damage*:**

"I just—I started thinking, like, **why? What was this for?**"

—Specialist Englehart

"**I was always mad when I was over there.** Mad at being there, mad at the way we were treated, everything."

—Sergeant Jefferies

"This was one occasion when our leaders led from the front. **They were among the first to visit the tailors to get their little patches of glory sewn next to their hearts.**"

—Camilo Mejia

**www.CollateralDamageIraq.com**

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it alienate the tribes that straddle the border and unleash violence throughout Pakistan on an Afghan scale; it transformed the so-called Pakistan Taliban from a sidekick of their Afghan big brother to a movement that today rules large chunks of the tribal areas as well as swaths of the "settled" North-West Frontier Province.

By the time Pakistan's new civilian government took office two facts were clear. The Taliban could not defeat the Pakistani army, which was then slowly recovering lost territories. But there could be no military victory against the militants. Peace will buy time and space, says the government. It will allow jobs to be created and schools to be built to wean tribesmen from an emerging Taliban polity that already has certain feature of a nascent state. Politically the aim is to domesticate the Taliban as a Pashtun movement rather than one allied with Al Qaeda's global jihad. "We have to talk to the Taliban," says Asif Ahmed Ali, a former foreign minister and now MP in the ruling Pakistan People's Party. "There'll be no peace in Pakistan or Afghanistan without it. The Taliban is the only force that can expel Al Qaeda."

Such views require a seismic shift by Washington. It won't happen soon. In fact, Bush Administration policy calls for more of the same. The very moment Musharraf's parties were being trashed in elections, US commanders were negotiating with the ex-dictator about flight rights in the tribal areas to kill Al Qaeda fugitives. The aim was to "shake down" Al Qaeda's command to get a better fix on the whereabouts of Osama bin Laden, preferably before Bush's exit in January.

American envoys asked the new government whether it would be bound by Musharraf's promise. No, it said. Since elections had endorsed peace with the Taliban, the government asked Washington to respect it. Instead, on May 14 US guided missiles killed fifteen in the Bajaur tribal area, including a child and perhaps an Al Qaeda commander. The Pakistani army said the attacks were "completely counterproductive" to both the government's and NATO's policies.

Around this time NATO officials began leaking reports about a 50 percent hike in Taliban penetration into Afghanistan. And US commanders like General McNeil wondered aloud if there was a direct correlation between peace in Pakistan and war in Afghanistan.

Few Pakistani army officers believe the killing of the Frontier Corps soldiers was a fluke. Rather, it's seen as signaling a shift in Washington away from a policy of renting the Pakistani army to "do more" against the Taliban and Al Qaeda in the tribal areas to one where the United States goes in alone.

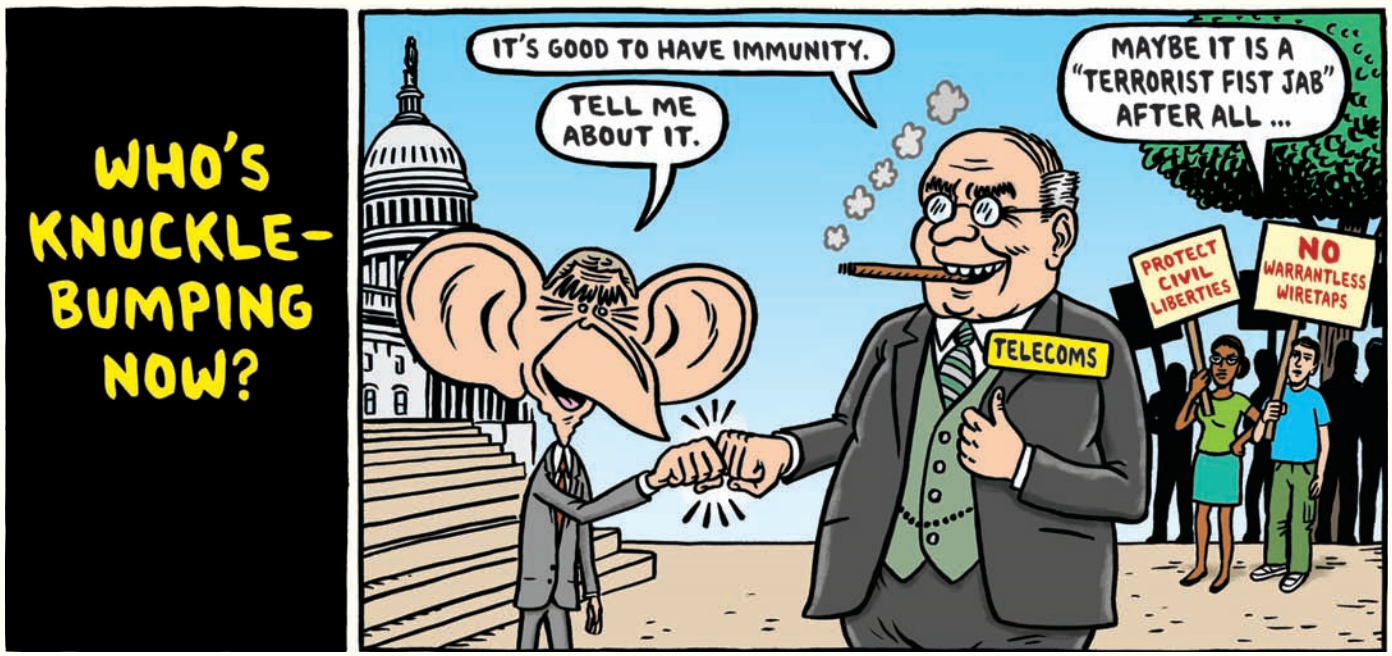
The new line appears to have support among some Democrats: "I've repeatedly challenged George Bush and John McCain's refusal to hold the Pakistan government accountable for its inability to crack down on Al Qaeda and Taliban operating within its borders. We are not going to get Afghanistan right until we get our Pakistan policy right," said Barack Obama on June 18. Getting Pakistan right, he explained last year, means sending US forces into the tribal areas to hunt down bin Laden.

Three things would happen if the United States did that, say analysts. It would convert the Pashtun tribes' passive support for the Taliban into a nationalist uprising in its defense. It would split the Pakistani army into pro- and anti-American factions, undermining the one national institution able to contain the Taliban. And it would destroy the post-9/11 US-Pakistan alliance, which, for all its flaws, has scored some success against the Al Qaeda leadership, including the capture of those who allegedly planned the attacks on America. For all these reasons, there could be no greater victory for the Taliban or Al Qaeda than an American military incursion into Pakistan. GRAHAM USHER

*Graham Usher is a journalist based in Islamabad.*

## Comix Nation

by WARD SUTTON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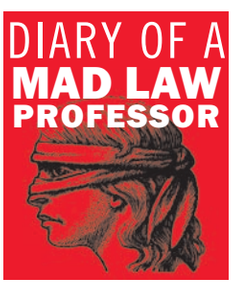
# Patricia J. Williams

## Movin' On Down

In the 1970s, as a very new lawyer, I moved to California. I did consumer protection; there was such a thing back then. The city of Los Angeles was still reeling from a lien equity scandal, dating to the '60s, in which unscrupulous lenders and building contractors misled homeowners into signing usurious or fraudulent contracts. Thousands of mostly elderly and minority families lost their homes to foreclosure as a result. Back then too, interest rates were calculated by a dizzying array of impossibly convoluted accounting methods—all to conceal true costs.

The personal devastation wrought by this underhandedness was great enough to become the fuel for social movement. Laws were passed requiring contracts to display the interest rate in clear, conspicuous lettering and for that rate to be computed according to a standardized method. (That's the now familiar number we call the APR.) Caps were placed on the interest that could be charged so that it did not compound faster than any working person could pay off. "Cooling off" periods—such as three days to change one's mind—were mandated for businesses where hard-sell tactics had been particularly pervasive.




Many of those laws have been constricted or ignored since. Loan-sharking has resurged with global force. With the Bush Administration's disdain for regulation, the "ghetto lending" practices of the 1960s have metastasized, spreading across class, race and regional boundaries. Intersecting with the massive pooling of mutual and hedge funds, this corruption has had international consequences that dwarf Enron and the savings and loan scandals of the '80s. If such practices began in neighborhoods where there was disrespect for the property rights of certain Americans, it's come round to bite us in the tail. We are all in the ghetto now.

I spent the past few days in New Orleans. Nearly three years after the hurricane, it's still a city in mourning, more riven than ever. About 40 to 50 percent of the population has not returned, most because they have not been able to. Even homeowners with insurance have complained that some companies refuse to pay them directly for repairs, instead giving the money to the banks that hold their mortgages. Such testimonies make me guess that what these homeowners had purchased was not insurance for repairs but so-called "credit insurance"—where policyholders pay the insurer to protect not them but their *creditors* in case of disaster. It's a kind of insurance that was outlawed in most places thirty years ago. It's common everywhere now.

Rents have soared in New Orleans because of decreased housing stock. Yet the City Council recently OK'd the demolition of virtually all surviving public housing—large brick-and-mortar buildings, mostly with blown-out windows, all eminently repairable. Today, the Lower Ninth Ward is an eerily lush plain of overgrown sadness. Of its 15,000 residents before the storm, only 1,400 remain. One intriguing embellishment upon this expansive devastation is the flutter of little signs affixed to the remaining lampposts: Easy Terms! Refinance With Us! No Money Down! I couldn't help but think of my first cases in LA and prayed that someone was having a good close look at the fine print. Local newspapers are full of disturbingly gushy articles about realtors who slaver over the historic row houses still standing in poor black areas. They see "the next SoHo!"

American mobility depends on the equity accumulated in its homes. The cyclical assault on African-American homeownership in the last half-century left us with ravaged black "inner cities" and strip-malled "havens" of white suburban blight. Now, given the energy crisis, bike-able, in-town locations like Harlem are suddenly desirable; formerly fashionable outlying regions are where property values are falling fastest. New Orleans is just the most vulgar iteration of an inner city being "rediscovered," "reclaimed" and "repossessed" by moneyed interests. To hasten the process of what one half calls gentrification and the other half feels as dispossession, the city has passed an "anti-blight" ordinance. Posters have cropped up in front of houses where only the walls remain: Do You Know Where This Owner Is? These signs pass as public notice; found owners are slapped with anti-blight fines. Failure to pay results in forfeiture.

Recently, Rush Limbaugh snickered that the residents of Cedar Rapids and other drowned cities along the upper Mississippi weren't "whining" about their condition like those noisy New Orleanians. Well, it's quiet in New Orleans now—a terrible brew of frustration beyond words. If it is just as quiet in the largely white floodplains of the Midwest, we should not take that for a good thing in an economy as troubled as ours. Their saga is just beginning, after all, and it remains to be seen if insurers will pull back and developers swoop in with the same greed as in New Orleans. Certainly, the burst levees in Iowa and Missouri are signs of the same broken infrastructure, even if the corruption that allowed it is not as visible, cruel or racially inflected as in the delta.

Here, as I see it, are the two models competing for our future: on the one hand, while walking in the Eighth and Ninth Wards, I saw scores of volunteers from all over North America, a rainbow coalition with hammers in hand, working for organizations like Habitat for Humanity. On the other hand, I overheard a conversation between two white men apparently touring "for deals." The first was wearing an Obama T-shirt. The second said amiably, "So, you're for Obama." "No," replied the first man; he was "a liberal" but hadn't decided yet. Turns out he was just wearing the shirt to ingratiate himself with the natives—although "ingratiate" was not the word he used.

If, as I hope, we have the collective good sense to make Barack Obama our reconciling Nelson Mandela, turning the vast injured ship of state around will not be something he can do alone or overnight. Ultimately, that will require many more of us to see the true value of "brand America" as an investment in our bridges as much as in our walls; and in one another as much as in ourselves. ■

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# Eric Alterman

## Obama vs. the Smart Guys (and Dumb Wars)

One of the many (many) salutary aspects of Barack Obama's impending presidential nomination is the sea change his victory marks in the battle for the mind-set of the American foreign policy establishment. Not only was Obama unambiguously opposed to the American invasion of Iraq back when it mattered but—in marked contrast to the Clinton campaign—so were most of his advisers and supporters. Indeed, without this essential distinction from his opponent, coupled with her unwillingness to repudiate or apologize for her vote for George W. Bush's war, the Obama campaign would likely never have found the base of support it needed to mount a serious nomination fight.

Recall the bracing good sense of Obama's October 2002 speech to a rally organized by Chicagoans Against War in Iraq: "I…know that Saddam poses no imminent and direct threat to the United States, or to his neighbors, that the Iraqi economy is in shambles, that the Iraqi military [has] a fraction of its former strength, and that in concert with the international community he can be contained until, in the way of all petty dictators, he falls away into the dustbin of history. I know that even a successful war against Iraq will require a US occupation of undetermined length, at undetermined cost, with undetermined consequences. I know that an invasion of Iraq without a clear rationale and without strong international support will only fan the flames of the Middle East and encourage the worst, rather than best, impulses of the Arab world, and strengthen the recruitment arm of Al Qaeda."

Though it fueled his primary victories, Obama's prescience regarding Iraq was actually a handicap with many in the media. Amazingly, given the scope of the catastrophe the war has visited on the United States and the world, the spectrum of punditocracy opinion on foreign policy remains dominated by people who got Iraq entirely wrong and are proud of it. On the right we get arguments like that from *The Weekly Standard*'s Fred Barnes, who believes that "Obama's not in quite as strong a position on the war in Iraq as he really thinks he is, because the entire world believed that Saddam Hussein in Iraq had weapons of mass destruction." Much of the left and center, meanwhile, remain wedded to the view articulated by liberal pundit Richard Cohen, who, borrowing from the French ex-Stalinist Pierre Courtade, insisted, "You and your kind were wrong to be right; we were right to be wrong." As *Slate*'s Timothy Noah, a repentant war supporter, noted not long ago, "Five years after this terrible war began, it remains true that respectable mainstream discussion about its lessons is nearly exclusively confined to people who supported the war, even though that same mainstream acknowledges, for the most part, that the war was a mistake." And yet the "people who opposed U.S. entry into the Iraq war, it would appear, are insufficiently 'serious' to explain why they were right."

It would nevertheless be a mistake for those of us who knew better at the time to dismiss forever the judgment of everyone who was taken in. Mistakes, after all, are endemic to foreign and military policy given the unpredictability of events and the difficulty of securing reliable information in a place like Iraq. But the onus ought to be on those who drove this SUV off the cliff to explain why we should ever strap ourselves into their vehicle again. *Slate*'s Jacob Weisberg is surely correct to observe that "it's incumbent upon those of us who blew the biggest foreign-policy decision of the past decade to try to understand our mistake—and to try to learn something from it."

That learning process, however, has been stalled not only by the unwillingness of the hawks to look in the mirror but also by a lack of intellectual rigor on the part of those who did. Typically, neocons either deny the fact of a mistake or blame the Iraqis for what has gone wrong. As Charles Krauthammer explains it, "The root problem lies with Iraqis and their political culture." Liberals and moderates tend to foist all the blame on the Bush Administration's incompetence and fecklessness, as if this was somehow news to them in 2003 and now makes their criticism all the more valuable. As Leon Wieseltier views things, their position as supporters of the war "gives them a perverse and somewhat paradoxical authority in expressing their criticisms of the way the war was conducted." Others blame—*pace* Michael Ignatieff—the fact that they are academics, because "a sense of reality doesn't always flourish in elite institutions." Yet these same elite universities happened to be the locus of opposition to the war when Ignatieff—now a politician in Canada—was braying for it.

While *The Atlantic*'s Andrew Sullivan—there, I said it—and Jonathan Rauch, along with others, have engaged in serious self-critiques, I was recently reminded of just how rare these are when reading a partial draft of a lengthy manuscript by former *New Republic* editor and especially aggressive liberal hawk Peter Beinart. He was one of the few journalists Bill Moyers interviewed for his *Buying the War* documentary to demonstrate Beinart's genuine contrition for the irrational exuberance he exhibited when arguing on behalf of war. Inspired by his mistakes in Iraq, he's embarked on an examination of the role that "toughness" and "hubris" have played in determining America's response to world events. Whether Beinart succeeds is to some degree beside the point; in undertaking the effort, he is demonstrating what it means to be a responsible member of the nation's elite. Just how few of his fellow hawks of the left, right and center have joined Beinart on this journey serves as another reminder of how fortunate this country is to have before it a presidential candidate who needed no instruction in the first place. "I am not opposed to all wars. I'm opposed to dumb wars," Barack Obama explained six years ago. He got it right. Now, perhaps, so can we… ■

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CHRISTOPHER MARTIN

George Mitchell and his daughter Chandra Chavis in front of his home in Atlanta's Westwood neighborhood

# The Subprime Swindle

How the mortgage industry stole black America's hard-won wealth.

**by KAI WRIGHT**

George Mitchell's wife, Lillian, took her last breath in the house she loved, on New Year's Day 2006. "Right there in that spot," says George, 77, nodding to the far end of his worn, floral-print couch. "I think the last words she spoke was my name."

"Yup," confirms his youngest daughter, Chandra Chavis. "I was trying to perform mouth-to-mouth resuscitation at the time." She points out the living room window to the small, sloping front yard and drive. "There was no address on the house, so I had to stop doing that to get the ambulance to come in." But Lillian's heart had seized, and Chandra knows there's not much she could have done anyway. She figures if even the trauma team at Atlanta's century-old public hospital couldn't revive her mom, she must have been long gone. "Nobody can bring you back if the Lord calls you," concludes an older daughter, Gwen Russell.

It was Lillian's tenacity that led the Mitchell family to Atlanta's Westwood neighborhood, in 1968. "She was determined," Chandra explains, "not to have her children in an apartment—I know the story; I've heard it a million times—so she found somebody, a real estate agent, and they came out and they looked in this neighborhood. I don't know what brought them to this part of town, 'cause at the time they were living in Dixon Hills"—then an up-and-coming black neighborhood—"but she decided she wanted a house, and this is where she found it."

"All I did was sign the paper," says George with a shrug.

That made the Mitchells one of the first African-American families to move into Westwood. Atlanta has long been known as the "black Mecca," a place where African-Americans have been able to claw up the socioeconomic ladder and plunge into America's consumer culture. Nowhere is that striving more visible than in the massive subdivisions of large, new homes that Atlanta's black bourgeoisie have erected, reaching far into the suburbs. But the process began generations ago in a cluster of inside-the-beltway neighborhoods wedged into the city's southwestern corner, including Westwood. Today that area is reeling, having been one of the nation's communities hardest hit by the one-two punch of subprime lending and home foreclosures. The Mitchells have not been spared. Like hundreds of thousands of Americans, they are scrambling to keep the house Lillian found for them.

Nearly 18,000 homes faced foreclosure in the Atlanta area during the first quarter of 2008, an almost 40 percent jump from the first quarter of 2007. In Fulton County, which encompasses most of the city's core and is heavily African-American, one in 122 homes was in foreclosure in the first week of April. A digest of Atlanta's March 2008 "foreclosure starts" was as thick as the phone book, and the Mitchells' 30310 ZIP code topped the list.

The area boasts an old stock of quaint, midcentury houses painted in bright yellows and crisp blues, accented with quirky

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touches that now feel more haunting than homey. On block after block, as many homes sit vacant or bank-owned as not. Boarded-up windows lurk behind white-columned front porches, and the yards are slowly going to weeds and trash. On one block, eleven boarded-up houses line the street, making the area look like it's been hit by a natural disaster.

But the disaster is depressingly man-made. And this neighborhood reveals a deeply troubling dimension of it, one that will echo long past the recovery everyone hopes will soon come: for black America, the "mortgage meltdown" looks less like a market hiccup than a massive strip mining of hard-won wealth, a devastating loss that will betray the promise of class mobility for tens of thousands of black families.

> 'A lot of older African-Americans were house rich but cash poor. So lenders came up with scams to siphon the wealth away.' —Nikitra Bailey

As the mortgage crisis unfolded, observers of all political stripes repeated a boilerplate line: the "affordability products" that have flooded the lending market in recent years—from subprime to interest-only loans—have done more good than bad by fueling a surge in black and Latino homeownership. But while minority homeownership may have grown in the short term, the long-term outlook promises quite the opposite, as southwest Atlanta painfully illustrates.

First-time homebuyers have originated less than a tenth of all subprime loans since 1998, according to a 2007 Center for Responsible Lending analysis. As recently as 2006, just over half of all subprime loans were refinances of existing home loans. The expected foreclosure toll from these loans will outpace the ownership gains by nearly a million families, the center estimates.

That's particularly true in established black neighborhoods like Westwood, where banks and brokers targeted vulnerable longtime homeowners and lured them into needless and rapidly recurring mortgages they clearly couldn't afford and from which they never stood to gain. More than half of all refinance loans made to African-Americans in 2006 were subprime, according to an analysis by the advocacy group ACORN. That's nearly twice the rate among white borrowers. Among low-income black borrowers, 62 percent of refinance loans were subprime, more than twice the rate among low-income whites.

"It actually started in communities like Atlanta," says Nikitra Bailey, a Center for Responsible Lending researcher who has studied the Southeastern US housing crisis. "A lot of our older African-Americans were house rich but cash poor. So lenders came up with these scams to siphon the wealth away."

It's a loss black America can scarcely afford, because black wealth has long been enormously dependent on home equity. In 1967, the year before the Mitchells bought their house, homes accounted for 67 percent of black wealth, compared with 40 percent of white wealth. The disparity has only grown, pushed by the turn-of-the-millennium stock market boom. Without counting home equity, black net worth in 2004 was just 1 percent of that for whites, according to research by New York University economics professor Edward Wolff.

This wealth gap makes the disaster unfolding in neighborhoods like Westwood all the more catastrophic. As the Mitchells sit in George's cluttered living room, wending their way through their past, they bump against memories of family after family who are in quandaries just like theirs—friends and neighbors struggling to hold onto homes they bought decades ago. "It's a crying shame," Gwen rails. "People been living around here forever! I think it's wrong," she complains, throwing up her hands in resignation. "But what can I say?"

The Mitchells mark time by the particulars of their history. They know, for instance, that George retired from thirty years of delivering mail to his neighbors in 1985, because that's when Chandra came back from Germany with her newborn son. And they know they moved into this house forty years ago, because that's when Gwen had her child. "Yup, Kipper would have been 40 this year," Gwen says, nodding for emphasis as she mentally links the house's life span with that of her son, who died in 2000 in a car accident. "Forty years in this house right here."

George doesn't remember his white neighbors giving the family any trouble when they moved in, but they didn't roll out the welcome mat either. He still laughs at one neighbor's reaction when he and the realtor stopped in front of the guy's house. "The dude, he broke out the house like somebody hit him with a hot poker! He was talking about how he built this house and he did it for his family and he didn't want nobody in it. And all I did was look at the house. But I tell you, the next time I went through there it was some black ones in it—'cause he was gone." Before long, so were all of the Mitchells' white neighbors.

George and Lillian took over a previous owner's $16,000 mortgage for their 1,600-square-foot home. With two incomes, they easily managed the monthly note. Then and now, the house offered the family security and stability.

"I was 6," Chandra proudly declares of the age at which she began living here. "My son grew up in this house, too," she adds. They've all lived here at some point over those decades. George's four kids and six grandchildren have spread out around the South—a son in Fayetteville, Georgia; a middle daughter in Birmingham, Alabama—but this has always been what Gwen calls the "home house."

Gwen stays here three days a week, when she's off from her job as a live-in nurse. Chandra and her husband own a home a few neighborhoods over. But her 20-year-old son, Marcus, lives here with his aunt and grandpa. Chandra frets that "the knucklehead" won't get his life together and go to college or take real steps toward his dream of opening an auto-body shop. But she knows he's got a roof over his head and, in time,

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*Kai Wright (KaiWright.com), a writer in Brooklyn, New York, is the author of* Drifting Toward Love: Black, Brown, Gay and Coming of Age on the Streets of New York. *Research support was provided by the Investigative Fund of The Nation Institute.*

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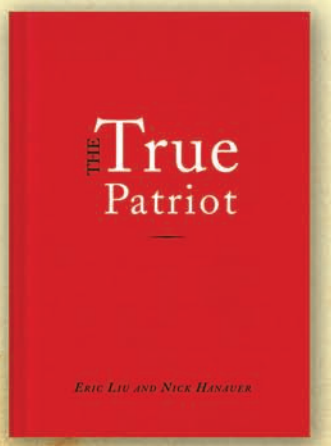


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will sort it out. "You can always come home to Momma and Daddy when times get tough," Gwen says affectionately.

George and Lillian were lucky to get the house, because African-Americans were largely locked out of the massive mid-twentieth-century public-private effort to expand access to credit and homeownership.

America hasn't always been a majority "ownership society," as George W. Bush likes to call it. The nation's first homeownership boom came after World War II, when the government used the Federal Housing Administration's (FHA) mortgage insurance to lower the cost of buying. Banks extended credit lines to middle-class borrowers in ways that encouraged long-term ownership—thirty-year mortgages covering 80 percent to 90 percent of the buyer's costs with interest rates of about 6 percent. By 1960, the American homeownership rate had shot up from less than half before the war to nearly 65 percent, where it remained until the modern housing market took off.

Black communities were excluded from this rising tide. The FHA's underwriting manual guaranteed insurance for segregated white neighborhoods only, until a series of court cases between 1948 and 1953 struck down the rule. Even then, the policy changed in word alone: 98 percent of the 10 million homes federal money had backed by 1965 went to whites, and banks' redlining of black neighborhoods went on for years thereafter. As a result, the black-white disparity in homeownership hasn't dropped below 20 percentage points since 1940; it was at 25 percentage points in 2007.

The 1977 Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) aimed to end the lending bias in the housing market. The complex law boils down to a simple principle: anywhere a federally insured bank or thrift takes deposits, it must give out credit. The law also set up regular audits of the institutions' lending practices to police compliance.

Today, when industry backers aren't touting the good that subprime mortgages have done, they're arguing that the CRA set the stage for the market's current collapse by encouraging lending to "risky" borrowers. But subprime lending didn't start with the demand that banks serve the community; it grew out of the removal of usury laws that governed how much banks could charge for their lending services. Having fought the CRA tooth and nail in the late '70s, by 1980 the banks were pushing for regulatory changes that would allow them to profit from the requirement. Says the Center for Responsible Lending's Nikitra Bailey, "It's like once we got in the game, the rules changed."

So did the loan products offered by banks. Subprime loans emerged in the 1980s and slowly multiplied, driven in part by the new deregulation and in part by an explosion of brokers and other unregulated lending entities—many of them subsidiaries of traditional, otherwise regulated banks. These products were supposed to be tools to firm up poor credit and bridge low-income borrowers to prime loans. For years, they remained a tiny, if troubling, share of overall lending, accounting for just 5 percent of all mortgage originations in 1994. The problems started when the housing market took off at the turn of the millennium, driven by historically low interest rates, skyrocketing sales prices and the resulting global rush to invest in the US mortgage market. Suddenly, subprime loans turned into trapdoors—increasingly exotic products through which lenders, desperate to feed the mortgage investment beast, lured people into needless debt. By 2004 subprime loans were 20 percent of home loans—and half of all home-purchase and refinance borrowers had one in 2006.

The Mitchells, for their part, started out OK. Guarded by Lillian's caution, they leveraged their new house to get opportunities otherwise beyond their grasp. The Mitchells paid for the final two years of Chandra's bachelor's degree at Clark—one of Atlanta's famed historically black colleges—with their first refinance, in 1981; her Clark sticker is still in the upstairs window. "I thought she needed an education," George explains. "She wanted one. So I saw to it she had it."

**For two decades the Mitchells' lending history was a quiet affair. Then, in 2003, the deed record erupts with increasingly large refinance loans.**

And for the next two decades, the Mitchells' lending history remained a relatively quiet, measured affair—a few more mortgages on the home, all for less than $40,000. Then, in 2003, the deed record for their house suddenly erupts into a line of increasingly large refinance loans, falling one after another in quick succession.

It starts with a $68,000 loan in May 2003—that's the one they made for the new siding. By that December, they'd already refinanced for $100,000. In December 2006, there's another loan, with now-defunct NovaStar Mortgage, for just over $116,000. Two months later there's a package of two more loans, totaling about $125,000 and owed to California-based IndyMac Bank. The IndyMac loan package is a classic subprime product—interest-only payments for five years, at a fixed rate of just over 6 percent, then adjusting upward to about 9 percent plus the principal.

"That is just not an appropriate loan product for someone who's 76 years old and who's on a fixed income," says Atlanta Legal Aid Society attorney Sarah Bolling, who's representing the Mitchells in their effort to keep their house. "The only calculation that would make this make sense is to say, 'Well, we'll give him a low rate and in five years he won't be alive.' But that's pretty cynical." Not that it mattered: George managed to pay the loan for only two months before falling behind. Within a year, he was in default.

It's a familiar story in 30310. Not far away from the Mitchells, the Hoods are desperately trying to hold onto a house they bought in 1975. A retired couple living largely on Social Security, they owe $176,000 on a house that may be worth just over $100,000. A broker from Maryland had cold-called them and talked them into a series of refinances. Another senior citizen, Jennie McCaslin, bought her house in 1970. In 2005 a broker sold her a $67,000 rehab loan, then flipped her through a series of refinances that left her owing

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$102,000, with an adjustable interest rate that can reset as high as 17 percent. One of the loans was co-signed by a 21-year-old niece, another by a son who was in jail at the time. McCaslin is functionally illiterate.

The Mitchells, Hoods and McCaslins are the "risky" and "irresponsible" borrowers cited in press coverage and policy debates about the foreclosure crisis. For months, the Bush Administration's mantra has been that whatever remedy Washington comes up with, it mustn't let borrowers off the hook for making bad choices. "I believe most Americans want to protect homeowners who played by the rules. They don't want to reward risky financial behavior," Assistant Secretary for Housing Brian Montgomery told the House Financial Services Committee in April.

The Administration and industry lobbyists have buttressed this rhetoric with claims that large numbers of those facing foreclosure are merely "speculators." "The strength of our economy relies on the willingness of people to take risks," Mortgage Bankers Association chair-elect David Kittle told an April 16 House Financial Services subcommittee hearing, "but risk means one does not always win."

It's a stunning statement when considering just how much risky speculating lenders themselves have engaged in during the past decade. The vast majority of homes facing foreclosure are owner-occupied. Aggregate data on those homeowners is spotty at best, but consumer advocates insist they look a lot like George Mitchell—people shoved into large, needless loans so that lenders could profit from the fast-growing securities market.

Much has been written about the role of the byzantine derivatives trade in the housing market's balloon and bust. Investment banks have been bundling pools of mortgages and selling them as securities since the mid-'80s. But when the housing market exploded in the early 2000s, those pools became immensely profitable. Banks started gobbling up mortgages from lenders, who in turn frantically cranked up their lending volume to cash in on the new demand. Brokers raked in money as banks offered incentives for them to close larger and larger loans. Investors worldwide poured cash into the profitable mortgage pools that formed.

If the securities market was the bonfire, borrowers were the kindling. Had lenders not sought out and made loans to people without regard to their ability to pay, the fire would have burned itself out long ago. Instead, when the supply of reliable borrowers was depleted, the subprime lending products that Reagan-era deregulation helped usher in kept the flames lapping. Undocumented loan applications, interest-only payment plans and teaser interest rates are all just the tools lenders used to forage for new borrowers. "The purpose of those products was to convince these people that they could get in," says Legal Aid attorney Bill Brennan.

George Mitchell, who, his daughters believe, suffered at least two strokes between 2003 and shortly after his wife's 2006 death, barely remembers taking out the February 2007 IndyMac loan that he's now suffocating under. Asked to recount how and why he took out any of the refinances he's made since his original 2003 siding loan, George furrows his brow and stares out from his thick gray beard in silence.

"Papa don't remember," a frustrated Gwen explains. She suspects he got calls from banks and brokers offering him new loans. "I'm almost sure," she says, noting that the house phone rings incessantly with marketers asking for her father by first name, as if they're old friends. "He orders things off TV. He doesn't realize he orders it. The pimple stuff?" She shoots a disgusted look at her dad when recalling that absurd package's arrival. "He says he didn't order it, but it came."

Despite their close role in George's life, none of the Mitchell children knew about the recent loans until February 2007. That's when George called Chandra and asked her to come by the house to witness him signing for one of the two loans in the IndyMac package. "I came over here with the intention of not signing the papers," Chandra says, recounting the frenzied afternoon. But the IndyMac loan officer, who Chandra says was at the house for just fifteen minutes, convinced her otherwise. "She told me you could not cancel the loan."

Nothing in George's loan file documents the inflated income claim—a practice known as 'no doc' and 'low doc' lending.

George explained to Chandra that he'd had trouble keeping up with that loan and with his credit cards since Lillian's death, due to the loss of her $500 a month in Social Security. "I read through what I could understand," Chandra says of the few minutes she was given to browse the IndyMac package. "It was really thick, and I don't know legalese, especially when it comes to loans. The only question that I had for her was, Could he cancel it, honestly?" Having been persuaded he could not, Chandra signed as a witness and hoped for the best.

George's signature is scrawled on the bottom of each of the loan's densely packed pages, as well as those of his initial loan application. But when Legal Aid's Sarah Bolling reads the application details back to him, he nearly leaps out of his recliner with shock. It lists his income as $4,725 a month. He collects $300 a month from Social Security and $1,400 a month from his Postal Service pension. Nothing in the loan file documents the inflated income claim—a practice known as "no doc" and "low doc" lending that has displaced the once-standard step of proving income to an underwriter.

The application also says George had nearly $8,000 in the bank at the time. "No way!" he gasps. "Ain't never been that kind of money in there." Again, nothing in the file documents the claim, and nothing about it raised flags for IndyMac's underwriters. Nor did it matter to the underwriters that the application appraised the house at more than $135,000. "The tax assessor thinks it's worth $73,000, and that's on the public record," says Bolling. "I mean, it might only be worth $70,000 at this point."

Even without these whoppers, it should have been clear to

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the bank's underwriters that George never stood to gain a thing from the loan—other than a larger, more dangerous debt burden. All but $361.74 of the $125,000 that didn't go to pay off NovaStar went to IndyMac's fees and closing costs. He nominally lowered his interest rate for a few years, but the loan value had ballooned so high—to more than double the original 2003 loan—that the interest rate was irrelevant. Whatever choices George made, the most dubious decision was IndyMac's willingness to make such a plainly bad loan.

"He was in foreclosure the day he signed the papers," says Legal Aid's Bill Brennan. Brennan has been fighting predatory lending in Atlanta for three decades, and to his eye the current crisis has less to do with exploding interest rates than the fact that banks, eager to profit from the surging securities market, simply approved any loan that came in the door. "They ran out of legitimately eligible borrowers a long time ago," he says.

United for a Fair Economy estimates the wealth loss for people of color at $164 billion–$213 billion, roughly half the nation's total loss.

The rapidity with which borrowers have fallen into foreclosure is telling. Georgia law requires lenders to publish foreclosure filings once a month, so Brennan's research team culled through Fulton County's 1,600 listings for last November. Three-quarters of the foreclosures were for loans made since 2005, half were made in 2006 and one in ten had been made that same year. That sort of turnover used to be remarkable. "Even a few years ago, it was unusual to see a foreclosure that occurred in less than two or three years," Georgia Tech researcher Dan Immergluck told the Georgia business newsletter *Daily Report*. He added that he has not seen foreclosures turn over that fast in the fifteen years he's been following the local market.

It's also clear that banks and brokers targeted African-American neighborhoods when mining for these loans. The Dekalb County community development office likes to show two maps to illustrate the point. One map shows Atlanta neighborhoods with the densest populations of people of color who could benefit from CRA lending. They are clumped together in a butterfly, centered on the city's south side. A nearly identical butterfly appears on the second map, which shows neighborhoods that had a foreclosure rate over 20 percent between the first quarters of 2000 and 2005.

"It used to be that you couldn't *get* credit, but now I tell people to just stay away from it," Brennan says. "You don't want it. It's toxic."

After taking the IndyMac loan, George Mitchell kept the seriousness of his financial troubles to himself until last summer, when the kids were all home for the Fourth of July. He told them then that the gas company was about to shut off his service. "We found out when everything was behind and the hounds was at the door," Chandra says.

He'd been paying the mortgage intermittently, but by the time he told his children about the problems he was at least two months behind. He'd also fallen even further behind on his already substantial credit card debt. The gas card had racked up. The water and light bills were past due as well.

"Once I paid the mortgage, there wasn't enough to cover—" George starts to explain, but Chandra cuts him off. "Actually, there was." She shares her mother's discipline, and she chides George for not adapting to the situation his IndyMac loan put him in. "Holly Golightly here wanted to go out and do other things. But you don't have money to do extra things now."

Chandra's frustration is understandable, because the crisis has affected more than just George's finances. All of the kids are chipping in to cover the sprawling costs. Gwen pays the water bill. Chandra and her husband pick up the phone bill and keep everybody fed by cooking enough for both households—that way George can focus on his mortgage payments and credit card debt. "Sometimes it's hard," Chandra says, "but this is family. And you have to do what you have to do for family."

Economists say this dynamic of wealth and resources flowing backward—from kids to parents—rather than forward is typical in black families, and an important part of what separates blacks and whites who, by other measures, are nominally of the same class. Researchers are hotly debating the details of what is expected to be a historically large intergenerational transfer of wealth in America over the coming decades. But one fact is clear: blacks won't participate in it. In 2004, one in four whites reported having received an inheritance; fewer than one in ten blacks said the same, and the amount they got was, on average, half that of whites.

The foreclosure crisis makes the picture look bleaker still. Estimates vary on the amount of wealth lost, but they are all in the hundreds of billions of dollars. A United for a Fair Economy estimate in January put the wealth loss for people of color at between $164 billion and $213 billion, roughly half the nation's overall loss.

State Senator Vincent Fort pads around the Georgia Capitol with the wan look of a man who knows where the bodies are buried. Fort, who represents the tract of Atlanta that's been hardest hit by foreclosures, saw the crisis coming. He wrote and managed to pass a law that would have averted the whole mess—if financial industry lobbyists hadn't flooded Georgia and got it repealed a year later. Now he's relegated to the role of gadfly, resubmitting the prescient bill each session and getting nowhere. Sitting in his office after the close of this winter's session, he rocks back and laughs at it all: "It's like getting pickpocketed at eighty miles an hour."

Fort's bill passed in 2001, with the strong-arm help of Democratic Governor Roy Barnes [see Bobbi Murray, "Hunting the Predators," July 15, 2002]. The law was meant to strengthen a 1994 Congressional measure, the Home Ownership and Equity Protection Act, which polices high-interest loans but has proven ineffective because its trigger is set too high. The Georgia law lowered the interest ceiling at which tougher rules kick in. And among other things, it forced lenders to demon-

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strate a "tangible net benefit" to the borrower for any refinancing of a home loan less than five years old.

The law was based on a 1999 North Carolina bill. Together, the two measures were the tip of what looked to be a building wave of state-level efforts to head off subprime lending—and the financial industry went all out to stop them. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, between 2002 and 2006 industry lobbyists poured tens of millions of dollars into state-level campaigns to prevent or undo subprime lending regulations.

Ameriquest, the now-defunct mortgage company that was one of the nation's largest subprime lenders, led the fight in Georgia. It handed out tens of thousands in political donations, according to the *Journal*, and threatened to stop doing business in the state unless Senator Fort's law was repealed. Standard & Poor chimed in, announcing that it wouldn't offer ratings for any mortgage securities with Georgia subprime loans in them, citing liability concerns.

"What we had in 2002 and 2003 was the most powerful companies in the world focused on Georgia," Fort says with a sigh. He relates how he was deluged from the moment he announced plans to write the bill, after hearing a presentation on subprime lending at a Department of Housing and Urban Development conference. He stood up and announced that he planned to address the problem in Georgia, and an industry lobbyist immediately approached him to offer "help." "I guess I learned a lesson: don't tell your enemy what you're going to do."

Within months of Standard & Poor's announcement, the Georgia Legislature repealed Fort's law and replaced it with one that removed the requirement that lenders show a tangible net benefit for refinance loans. The same process unfolded in New Jersey, where the Legislature passed a tough law in 2003. Lobbyists, led by Ameriquest, descended on the state. Standard & Poor repeated its refusal to rate securities with subprimes from New Jersey. And in 2004 the Legislature unanimously replaced the tough law with one that deleted the tangible-net-benefit rule.

"It's useless," Brennan says of the new Georgia law. "They would not have come back to Georgia if the 2001 bill had stayed in place. That was the purpose of the bill, to drive the predatory lenders out of the state." Indeed, North Carolina, where the net-benefit law held up, is today one of the states least impacted by the foreclosure crisis.

As Washington gears up for its belated response, industry lobbyists are once again warning against regulating lenders' behavior. During his April 16 House testimony, Mortgage Bankers Association's David Kittle described at length his members' voluntary efforts to work with borrowers to prevent foreclosure. "The key is to find solutions that help borrowers but do not violate the agreements with investors who now own the securities containing these loans," he cautioned.

The Bush Administration has joined the industry in opposing any measure that would force lenders to restructure loans or write-down their values. Bipartisan bills in the House and the Senate would do just that by empowering bankruptcy judges to force loan modifications for borrowers facing foreclosure on mortgages larger than the market value of their homes. Neither bill has gained traction.

Meanwhile, Congressional Democrats and the Administration have agreed on using the Federal Housing Administration to spur voluntary loan restructuring. They disagree mightily on how far to go, however.

An Administration plan announced in early April would let select subprime borrowers who are behind on their payments refinance into an FHA-insured loan; for loans larger than a house is worth, lenders would have to write the principal down. The Administration predicts the plan will help 100,000 homeowners. In June the Senate reached a compromise for a competing Congressional plan—a version of which passed the House in May—that would offer the same deal but with larger write-downs and would be available to far more borrowers, an estimated 400,000. The White House threatened to veto it, citing its cost and added taxpayer liability.

As the slow machinery of Washington grinds along, neighborhoods like Westwood are falling further and further into decay.

The Senate deal had enough support to override a presidential veto. But more than 2 million loans were at least sixty days delinquent in April, according to data from the Hope Now program, set up by the banking industry to facilitate voluntary workouts of troubled loans. Which means Washington will ultimately have to revisit the question of how to save people's homes, not to mention how to prevent new predation once this crisis passes.

Notably, Barack Obama has backed housing advocates' primary demand: allow bankruptcy courts to modify loans. He's also supporting a key part of the Senate plan, which would create a fund for local governments to buy foreclosed properties and thereby reverse the building glut of vacant, unsold housing. John McCain, meanwhile, has shifted his stance, initially echoing industry rhetoric about not aiding "irresponsible" borrowers, then unveiling a plan he said would help about 200,000 borrowers.

The Senate's homebuying fund is key because, as the slow machinery of Washington grinds along, neighborhoods like Westwood are falling further and further into decay. The ugly reality is that banks can foreclose on properties, but they can't resell them. With thousands of already overvalued homes up for sale, the market is flooded, further driving down property values. Banks, however, are hostage to the securities on which they gambled and cannot price the foreclosed homes at their actual value.

So the houses sit there, many with overgrown lawns, busted windows and piling trash. Squatters and drug dealers break in; scavengers mine them for copper and other valuable metals. Municipal tax bases drop, even as the vacant properties spawn crime and fires, which demand greater public service costs. "It's a major drain on the community and its resources," says Senator Fort.

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The Atlanta Legal Aid Society is trying to slow the decay one house at a time. For senior borrowers like George Mitchell, Brennan's team is betting on a strategy using a reverse mortgage. Under these complex deals, a lender gives an older borrower a loan for an agreed-upon percentage of the house's appraised value—usually about 60 percent. The borrower never has to pay that loan, but it accrues interest until the borrower dies. At that point, whoever inherits the estate has twelve months to either pay the principal plus interest or turn the house over to the lender.

Legal Aid secures a reverse mortgage, then offers the money from it to the foreclosing bank as a settlement—along with a threatening letter outlining the ways they believe the borrower was preyed upon. The message is clear: take this much and call it even or deal with a messy lawsuit. It's no universal solution, but as of January Brennan and Bolling had used it to save a couple dozen homes.

The Mitchells are hoping to join the list, but it'll mean a seemingly endless struggle to stay ahead of foreclosure. The eldest daughter, Patricia Taylor, is approaching retirement, when she had planned to move back to Atlanta from Birmingham and take over the Westwood home. The family figures if it can get George a reverse mortgage and make a deal with IndyMac, Patricia can in turn get her own reverse mortgage to pay off George's. That'll be a victory, of course, but one born from a sobering reality: forty years after George and Lillian Mitchell achieved the hallmark of American socioeconomic stability, their children embark upon a decades-long hustle to rescue what should have been capital-building equity from the grasp of paralyzing debt. ■

# John McCain's Voodoo Reformism

## His carefully cultivated maverick image obscures a tight relationship with lobbyists.

**by ARI BERMAN**

In early April John McCain held a top-dollar fundraiser at Washington's Willard Hotel, where President Ulysses S. Grant invented the term "lobbyist." It was a fitting locale, as the election-reform group Public Campaign noted, since thirty-five of the forty-three hosts for the evening were registered lobbyists. The following week Rick Davis—on leave from his job as a lobbyist to work as McCain's campaign manager—gave a strategy presentation to lobbyists from the oil, utility and nuclear power industries, soliciting campaign contributions.

McCain's ties to K Street began attracting attention, and a month later two of his key operatives were forced to resign after the press revealed that they'd lobbied for the Burmese dictatorship. A top McCain fundraiser, former Congressman Tom Loeffler, also got his walking papers after lobbying McCain on behalf of Saudi Arabia. In the space of ten days, five McCain lobbyists-turned-staffers left his campaign. Those who remained included senior adviser Charlie Black—formerly one of the most high-profile Republican lobbyists in Washington, who has represented the likes of Iraqi exile Ahmad Chalabi, mercenary contractor Blackwater and Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos. One could be forgiven for wondering, Was anyone in McCain's inner circle *not* a lobbyist?

Coziness between lawmakers and lobbyists is an old story in Washington, but in McCain's case such entanglements threaten to derail his maverick mystique. After his humiliating involvement in the Keating Five corruption scandal in the late 1980s, McCain worked tirelessly to cultivate a reputation as a chastened reformer. In the following years he made campaign-finance reform—specifically banning unlimited "soft money"

KAREN CALDICOTT

donations—a near crusade, working closely with Democratic Senator Russ Feingold and angering many Republicans. Embracing campaign-finance reform became a useful way for McCain to differentiate himself from his earlier incarnation and from the DeLays and Gingriches and Bushes who were corrupting the Republican Party. Yet his second run for the presidency, with its emphasis on courting conservative Republicans, highlights the fact that McCain has morphed back into a quintessential creature of Washington—just another politician who uses the issue of reform when it suits his agenda.

*Ari Berman, a* Nation *contributing writer, is a Puffin Foundation Reporting Fellow at The Nation Institute. Research support was provided by the institute's Investigative Fund.*

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For McCain, there is no better example of how the image of reform has obscured the intersection of corporate donations and DC lobbyists than the Reform Institute. A nonprofit with an Orwellian name, the institute was founded by McCain and his allies a year after his failed 2000 campaign. Billed as "a nonpartisan election reform organization whose Honorary Chair is Senator John McCain," the institute wasn't really nonpartisan, and McCain was far more than an honorary chair. "It was predicated on McCain's political connections," says Robert Crane of the JEHT Foundation, a social justice organization in New York and one of the Reform Institute's past funders. "It wasn't an independent entity." To be sure, the institute did some good work at the state level in support of clean elections, but it always remained a John McCain protection agency.

## Even as McCain was pushing the McCain-Feingold bill, he was gaming the campaign-finance system through his Reform Institute.

The Reform Institute paid for McCain to give speeches and host town hall meetings, touted him in press releases and cultivated his donor list. The group was housed in the same offices as McCain's PAC, his re-election committee and Rick Davis's lobbying firm, Davis Manafort, which represented telecommunications and gambling interests along with foreign governments like Nigeria and Ukraine. The staff included McCain's campaign manager, Davis, as president; his chief fundraiser, Carla Eudy; and his Internet consultant, Rebecca Donatelli. It was incorporated by McCain counsel Trevor Potter, with seed money from former Merrill Lynch CEO Herb Allison, McCain's finance chairman in 2000. McCain was chairman of the board from 2001 until 2005. Meanwhile, Davis earned $395,000 for three years of work, Eudy took in $294,000 as a consultant and treasurer, and McCain policy guru John Raidt made $145,000 in 2006, to give one example of how the Reform Institute padded the coffers of McCain's political brain trust.

At the outset, the organization's primary purpose was defending McCain's campaign-finance legislation, McCain-Feingold, before Congress, the Federal Election Commission and the Supreme Court. But even as McCain was pushing that bill, he was also gaming the campaign-finance system. The fact that a registered lobbyist was running an entity called the Reform Institute was not the only reason the group raised eyebrows in Washington.

As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, the Reform Institute could accept the kinds of unlimited tax-deductible contributions that McCain's PAC and re-election committee could not. Longtime McCain donors like California businessman William Bloomfield, former Houston Astros owner John McMullen and businessman and former diplomat Robert Stuart gave more than $50,000 each to the institute. According to Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, the largest donors to the institute also gave a combined $305,985 to McCain and his PACs. More unlikely funders included liberal foundations eager to find GOP allies on campaign-finance reform, like George Soros's Open Society Institute, the San Francisco–based Tides Foundation and the David Geffen Foundation. A number of donors who gave almost exclusively to Democrats also wrote large checks. So did wealthy executives who saw that giving to a McCain-affiliated nonprofit could be good for business. This category included insurance giant AIG (formerly run by McCain backer Hank Greenberg) and television interests like Univision, Cablevision and Echosphere.

As the two-time chair of the Senate Commerce Committee, McCain enjoyed unprecedented access to the telecommunications industry. And Davis the lobbyist was the perfect conduit: between 2002 and 2005, for example, Verizon paid Davis Manafort $640,000 in lobbying fees. The contract began after McCain took over the committee and ended when he gave up chairmanship. At the same time Davis aggressively sought telecom donations for the Reform Institute. On two occasions he solicited $100,000 from Cablevision after CEO James Dolan testified before McCain's committee and McCain wrote letters to the Federal Communications Commission on Cablevision's behalf. The donations invited scrutiny from the press: McCain Allies Want Reform (And Money), the *New York Times* said in March 2005. That July McCain formally resigned from the board, citing "negative publicity," and Davis stepped down as president.

Yet unscrupulous donations from industries McCain was supposed to be monitoring were only part of the reason the Reform Institute became controversial. Even before the dubious fundraising came to light (the institute also twice failed to disclose the names of major donors on its tax returns, a potential violation of IRS law), McCain and Davis's my-way-or-the-highway approach to campaign-finance-reform legislation rubbed many in the reform community the wrong way.

After the ban on soft-money contributions, McCain and the Reform Institute became strong proponents of regulating so-called 527 political advocacy groups, which arose because of a loophole in the McCain-Feingold law. The 527s were initially thought to benefit Democrats after liberal megadonors such as Soros and Peter Lewis funded the likes of America Coming Together and the Media Fund. In 2004 McCain introduced legislation to ban 527s, which Common Cause and the Brennan Center for Justice opposed, fearing McCain's bill would hamper standard activities like voter registration drives. According to Cliff Schecter's book *The Real McCain* and an interview that former Common Cause president Chellie Pingree gave to the *Portland Press Herald* in Maine, where she is now a Democratic candidate for Congress, McCain and Davis called funders and members of the Common Cause board and demanded they fire Pingree or rein her in. Such a move was all the more remarkable because for years the organization led the field operation for McCain-Feingold, building grassroots support for the legislation. "My understanding from people close to the situation is that Common Cause, under Chellie, was deciding to work on comprehensive public financing of elections and not on Senator McCain's 527 policy," says Nick Nyhart of Public

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Campaign, which has worked closely with the Reform Institute. "McCain and Davis objected and wanted her out. I've never heard of a public official, or an associate, trying to go after an ally in the nonprofit sector like that." The McCain campaign has declined to respond.

A similarly partisan bent marked the institute's work on election reform in Connecticut. In 2004 Connecticut's Republican governor, John Rowland, resigned amid scandal, later pleading guilty to mail fraud and tax fraud. His GOP heir, former lieutenant governor Jodi Rell, was hedging on whether to support public financing for state races similar to the "clean elections" legislation in Arizona and Maine. A coalition of good-government groups convened to push for public financing; the Reform Institute was tasked with signing up Republicans. In 2005 the coalition drew up a broad outline of how to press forward. "Davis came in and slammed the plan," Andy Sauer of Connecticut Common Cause recalls. "The tone was aggressive and hostile." According to Sauer, Davis wanted Democrats in the Legislature to crack down on labor unions in exchange for Republican support for the bill, and he didn't want the coalition to pressure Rell, a potentially vulnerable Republican governor. Rell eventually came on board and McCain publicly supported her, but only five Republicans in the Legislature signed on. "They were supposed to help make this a nonpartisan issue," Sauer says. "In the end, they didn't do that."

As McCain's commitment to campaign-finance reform waned, so did that of the Reform Institute. Congressional scandals involving Tom DeLay and lobbyist Jack Abramoff presented the best opportunity since Watergate for disinfecting Washington. Yet after investigating Abramoff's links to Indian tribes, McCain, then chair of the Indian Affairs Committee, was nowhere to be found. "I remember being very frustrated trying to get him on board lobbying reform," says Craig Holman of Public Citizen. "He remained aloof until too late, then offered a very weak bill." The Reform Institute, at best, was also a bit player. "We haven't worked with them for over a year," Holman says. "They're very defensive about any criticism of McCain." Neither McCain nor the institute has supported legislation to modernize the presidential public-finance system (the Feingold-Collins bill) or to publicly finance Congressional campaigns (Durbin-Specter); Barack Obama co-sponsored both bills. When asked in 2006 whether he still supported public financing, as he did in 2002, McCain responded, "No."

The Reform Institute has sought to cultivate the image of a post-McCain identity. "It's very independent of McCain," says executive director Cecilia Martinez, who previously worked to pass clean elections legislation in Arizona. But though McCain and Davis officially departed in 2005, many McCain loyalists remained involved with the institute and its advisory committees, including top fundraisers, former staffers and political allies of the Arizona senator.

The institute still closely resembles a McCain administration in exile and, predictably, takes up the same issues that McCain does. In 2005, as Ken Silverstein of *Harper's* noted, the institute added "climate stewardship" to its agenda, around the same time the Lieberman-McCain Climate Stewardship Act was reintroduced in the Senate. The institute's climate initiative was led by John Raidt, McCain's top policy adviser, and a grant for the work came from Environmental Defense, an enthusiastic backer of McCain's climate change bill. The Reform Institute began reaching out to the nuclear power industry, including the Nuclear Energy Institute, the industry's main lobbying arm. Not surprisingly, McCain also happens to be an energetic proponent of nuclear power, which he recently called "one of the cleanest, safest and most reliable sources of energy on earth." Today the institute's energy project is overseen by Ken Nahigian, a former counsel to McCain on the Commerce Committee whose brother, Keith, directed media strategy for McCain in 2000. Together the Nahigian brothers run a consulting firm whose clients include the Energy Department, the National Security Council and, yes, the Reform Institute. *Roll Call* listed the Nahigian brothers as part of a "stable of K Street lobbyists [who] have help[ed] pad McCain's campaign coffers." Other members of the Reform Institute's Energy Advisory Committee include David Pottruck, former CEO of Charles Schwab and a top fundraiser for McCain; Matthew Freedman, a former lobbying partner of Rick Davis; and Marc Spitzer, a Bush appointee to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission who is a friend, fundraiser and former tax adviser to McCain.

> Both McCain and the Reform Institute support nuclear power, which McCain has called 'one of the…most reliable sources of energy on earth.'

The institute's work has also reaped political benefits for McCain in the areas of immigration reform and outreach to Hispanic evangelical communities. In 2006 the institute hired Juan Hernandez, a former deputy to Vicente Fox, president of Mexico from 2000 to 2006. Hernandez, who now works on Hispanic relations for the McCain campaign, courted Hispanic evangelical organizations, a growing swing constituency and a ripe target for McCain. The group hosted a Capitol Hill press conference featuring the Rev. Sam Rodriguez of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, an umbrella of 15 million Hispanic Christians, who was described as "the Karl Rove of Latino evangelical strategy" by the *Chicago Tribune*. Another ally was Marcos Witt, Hispanic pastor at Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church in Houston, the country's fastest-growing megachurch. Members of the institute's Immigration Reform Advisory include Lindsey Graham, McCain's closest friend in the Senate; Eric Rojo, a member of the US-Mexico Chamber of Commerce who has donated to McCain; and Kim Binkley-Seyer, a former deputy to Jeb Bush in Florida.

Cecilia Martinez says it's natural that people close to McCain, like Lindsey Graham, would take an interest in the Reform Institute. "We're a home for centrists, moderates and conservatives," she says. "Where else are they going to go?" In fact, a lot of them have gone to work on McCain's campaign, including former institute staffers Davis, Eudy, Potter, Hernandez; former spokeswoman Crystal Benton, who now does press for McCain; and board member Pam Pryor, who was a chief of

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staff for conservative Oklahoma Congressman J.C. Watts and is the national coordinator of Women for McCain. "It's a question funders were worried about," said the JEHT Foundation's Crane. "Is this a political arm for John McCain?" In fact, much of the group's foundation funding has since dried up. Donors who once gave to the Reform Institute are instead raising money directly for McCain's campaign. Perhaps that's one reason the institute decided to focus on homeland security, a potentially lucrative source of post-9/11 funding.

The institute's newest obsession is "resiliency"—the latest buzzword in homeland security circles. Resiliency was an obscure engineering term for how systems bounce back from disruption, until it was popularized by Council on Foreign Relations scholar Stephen Flynn and embraced by politicians and industry. This winter Rudy Giuliani titled his homeland security blueprint "The Resilient Society." For business, invoking resiliency has been a shrewd way to avoid government security mandates, as the chemical industry did after 9/11, thwarting Congressional attempts to toughen standards at chemical plants by arguing, under the banner of resiliency, that they could monitor themselves better than the government could. Promoting a laissez-faire approach to regulation under the guise of protecting the homeland may be one reason the private sector loves resiliency; the Reform Institute's recent New York symposium on the topic attracted the likes of PR behemoth Burson-Marsteller, Bank of America, NASDAQ, Shell Oil, Alcatel-Lucent, Sprint, AT&T, Motorola and Verizon.

Resiliency also presents new business opportunities and political connections for members of the Reform Institute's Homeland Security Advisory Committee. The institute's homeland security director, Robert Kelly, is also chair of the homeland security division at the National Defense Industrial Association, a lobbying arm for military contractors like Bechtel and Halliburton. Kelly's vice chair, Rich Cooper, a fellow institute adviser, lobbies on resiliency issues for the American Society of Mechanical Engineering. A third member of the homeland security task force, David McIntyre of TriWest Healthcare in Phoenix, is a former McCain aide and longtime financial backer who is one of "several McCain loyalists [who] arise as possible Arizona appointees" should McCain win in November, the *Phoenix Business Journal* reported.

Homeland security is just one area where the institute reflects ties between McCain and the business/lobbying community. Economic policy adviser Joseph Schmuckler, an executive at the investment bank Mitsubishi UFJ, is McCain's campaign treasurer and a "Trailblazer" who's raised between $100,000 and $250,000 for McCain. Another Reform Institute economic policy adviser, Al Zapanta, president of the US-Mexico Chamber of Commerce, is both a "Virginia Business Leader for McCain" and a member of the senator's Hispanic Advisory Board.

Of the four members of the institute's current board of directors, only Charlie Kolb, president of the Committee for Economic Development, worked on behalf of campaign-finance reform. Two new members from the business world bring scant reform experience and questionable credentials: Paul Bateman is president of the Klein Saks Group in Washington, which lobbies on behalf of the mining industry. Lawrence Hebert was CEO of Riggs Bank from 2001 until 2005, when the company pleaded guilty to failing to report suspicious financial activity after hiding money and setting up shell accounts on behalf of Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet and Teodoro Obiang, autocrat of oil-rich Equatorial Guinea. Obiang, routinely labeled one of the world's worst dictators, was the biggest client of Riggs, with accounts totaling $700 million. At a Senate hearing in 2004 Senator Carl Levin asked Hebert, "How do you basically live with yourself?" Hebert oversaw the sale of Riggs to PNC Bank in 2005 and became chairman of the board of Dominion Advisory Group, which ironically specializes in stopping money laundering. In April he joined the Reform Institute's board, praising it as a "champion for private-sector innovation."

**Despite McCain's close ties to lobbyists and abandonment of campaign-finance reform, many activist groups continue to go easy on him.**

Despite McCain's close ties to lobbyists, exploitation of the reform community and abandonment of campaign-finance reform as a major issue, many reform groups in Washington continue to go easy on him. When Barack Obama opted out of the public-financing system for the general election, Public Citizen proclaimed itself "deeply disappointed" without noting that McCain had done the same during the Republican primary—after securing favorable bank loans when his campaign was broke by promising to accept federal matching funds, which he never did. Fred Wertheimer of Democracy 21, a longtime ally of McCain and perhaps the most widely quoted campaign-finance expert, also said he was "very disappointed" in Obama. "There are some who believe McCain will be with us at the end of the day, including those that have worked with him in the past," says David Donnelly of Public Campaign, one of the few groups that has run ads spotlighting McCain's ties to lobbyists and industry contributors. "Others see the overwhelming evidence of how McCain has retreated from reform and are no longer willing to cut him the slack they once did."

Donnelly notes that McCain has pledged to appoint Justices to the Supreme Court like John Roberts and Samuel Alito, who are critics of McCain-Feingold. In a nod to the hard right, the chairs of his campaign's judicial advisory committee are conservative Senator Sam Brownback and former Bush Administration Solicitor General Ted Olson. In 2007 Olson filed an amicus brief on behalf of Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell—arguably the number-one foe of campaign-finance reform—to overturn a key aspect of the McCain-Feingold bill in *Wisconsin Right to Life v. McCain*. The Supreme Court concurred in a controversial 5-to-4 decision in June 2007. So McCain's chief legal adviser has argued against McCain's chief legislative accomplishment. That's as ironic as the name of the Reform Institute. ■

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# The White Whale

Melville in *Moby-Dick* speaks of reality outracing apprehension—just as the whale was too much for Ahab and his crew, it may be that our new century is too much for us to comprehend.

**by E.L. DOCTOROW**

*In April 2007 in Washington there was a joint meeting of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Philosophical Society on the theme of "The Public Good: Knowledge as the Foundation for a Democratic Society." E.L. Doctorow's keynote address was titled "The White Whale." —The Editors*

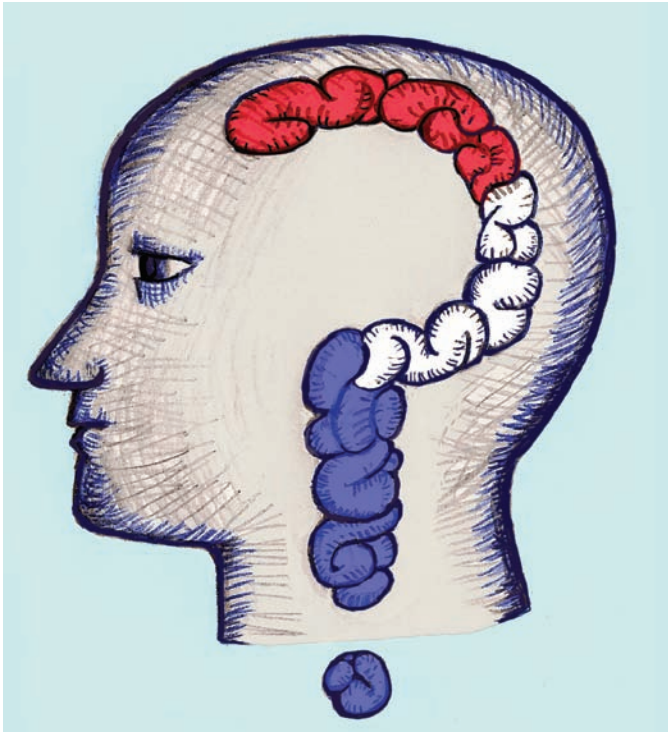
What does it say about the United States today that this fellowship of the arts and sciences and philosophy is called to affirm knowledge as a public good? What have we come to when the self-evident has to be argued as if—500 years into the Enlightenment and 230-some years into the life of this Republic—it is a proposition still to be proven? How does it happen that the modernist project that has endowed mankind with the scientific method, the concept of objective evidence, the culture of factuality responsible for the good and extended life we enjoy in the high-tech world of our freedom, but more important for the history of our species, the means to whatever verified knowledge we have regarding the nature of life and the origins and laws of the universe.... How does it happen for reason to have been so deflected and empirical truth to have become so vulnerable to unreason?

For some time now we have been confronted by a religiously inspired criminal movement originated in the Middle East that advertises its values by suicidal bombings, civilian massacres and the execution of arbitrarily selected victims by the sawing off of their heads. However educated, well-to-do and politically motivated the leaders of this conspiracy may be, they have invoked an extreme fundamentalist reading of their sacred text to mentally transport their rank and file back into the darkness of tribal war and shrieking, life-contemptuous jihad.

So that history, as we look to that part of the world, seems to be running backward, as if civilization is in reverse, as if time is a loop.

And here? The scientists this evening may have to correct me as I invoke the term "quantum nonlocality." As I understand the term and make metaphorical use of it, electrons shot from an atom will mirror one another no matter how far apart they are driven: a mile, ten miles, a hemisphere apart—you look at one and you have a reflection of the other, a kind of weird subatomic dance in celebration of the mimetic proclivities of everything in the universe, is quantum nonlocality.

This is not to suggest that our waterboarding and sensory-deprivation torture techniques, that Abu Ghraib and the incarceration in perpetuity without trial of terrorist suspects at Guantánamo, are the moral equivalent of 9/11. Only that a declared enemy with the mind-set of the Dark Ages throws his anachronistic shadow over us and awakens our dormant primeval instincts.



KAREN CALDICOTT

Apart from this uncanny synchronous spin, the domestic political fantasy life of these past seven years finds us in an unnerving time loop of our own making—in this country, quite on its own, history seems to be running in reverse and knowledge is not seen as a public good but as something suspect, dubious or even ungodly, as it was, for example, in Italy in 1633, when the church put Galileo on trial for his heretical view that the earth is in orbit around the sun.

I am not a scientist and don't deal in formulas, but as a writer I would, in the words of Henry James, take to myself "the faintest hints of life" and convert "the very pulses of the air into revelations." That surely provides me with a line to unreason. And so when I read that the President of Iran denies the historical truth of the Holocaust, and when I hear the President of the United States doubting the scientific truth of global warming, I recognize that no matter what the distance they would keep between them, and whatever their confrontational stance, they are fellow travelers in the netherworld.

Two things must be said about knowledge deniers. Their rationale is always political. And more often than not, they

*E.L. Doctorow's novels include* World's Fair, City of God *and, most recently,* The March *(2005). His selected essays,* Creationists, *was published in 2006.*

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hold in their hand a sacred text for certification.

But, you may say, am I not narrowing this issue, politicizing it by speaking of our President? In this discussion of knowledge as a foundation for a democratic society, am I not misusing this forum to broadcast a partisan point of view? Albert Einstein once said that even the most perfectly planned democratic institutions are no better than the people whose instruments they are. I would translate his remark this way: the President we get is the country we get. With each elected President the nation is conformed spiritually. He is the artificer of our malleable national soul. He proposes not only the laws but the kinds of lawlessness that govern our lives and invoke our responses. The people he appoints are cast in his image. The trouble they get into, and get us into, is his characteristic trouble. Finally, the media amplify his character into our moral weather report. He becomes the face of our sky, the conditions that prevail.

From those fundamentalist leaders who proclaimed 9/11 as just deserts for our secular humanism, our civil libertarianism, our feminists, our gay and lesbian citizens, our abortion providers, and in so doing honored the foreign killers of nearly 3,000 Americans as agents of God's justice… to the creationists, the biblical literalists, the anti-Darwinian school boards, the right-to-lifer antiabortion activists, the shrill media ideologues whose jingoistic patriotism and ad hominem ranting serves for public discourse—all of it in degradation of the thinking mind, all of it in fear of what it knows—these phenomena are summoned up and enshrined by the policies of this President. At the same time he has set the national legislative program to run in reverse as he rescinds, deregulates, dismantles or otherwise degrades enlightened legislation in the public interest, so that in sum we find ourselves living in a social and psychic structure of the ghostly past, with our great national needs—healthcare, education, disaster relief—going unmet. The President may speak of the nation in idealistic terms, but his actions demonstrate that he has no real concept of national community. His America, like that of his sponsors, is a population to be manipulated for the power to be had, for the money to be made. He is the subject of jokes and he jokes himself about his clumsiness with words, but his mispronunciations and malapropisms suggest a mind of half-learned language that is eerily compatible with his indifference to truth, his disdain for knowledge as a foundation of a democratic society.

It will take more than revelations of an inveterately corrupt Administration to dissolve the miasma of otherworldly weirdness hanging over this land, to recover us from our spiritual disarray, to regain our once-clear national sense of ourselves, however illusory, as the last best hope of mankind. What are we become in the hands of this President, with his relentless subversion of our right to know; his unfounded phantasmal justifications for going to war; his signing away of laws passed by a Congress that he doesn't like; his unlawful secret surveillance of citizens' phone records and e-mail; his dicta time and time again in presumption of total executive supremacy over the other two branches of government; his insensitivity to the principle of separation of church and state; his obsessive secrecy; his covert policies of torture and extraordinary


## MILITANT ATHEISM: A THREAT TO CIVIL LIBERTIES?

In Defense of Religion is a book that attacks head-on and in detail the recent anti-religion books by Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett. It alerts readers to the implications of their intolerant thinking for democracy and personal freedom.

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The author, John Gibson (John W. Gibson Jr.) has also written Against Fundamentalism and Plato.

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rendition, where the courtroom testimony of the tortured on the torture they've endured at our hands is disallowed on the grounds that our torture techniques are classified; his embargoing of past presidential papers, and impeding access to documents of investigatory bodies; his use of the Justice Department to bring indictments or quash them as his party's electoral interests demand.... Knowledge sealed, skewed, sequestered, shouted down, the bearers of knowledge fired or smeared, knowledge edited, sneered at, shredded and, as in the case of the coffins of our dead military brought home at night, no photography allowed, knowledge spirited away in the dark.

Now, I realize that with these remarks I may be violating the linguistic proprieties of an academic convocation. I realize, in the tenor of these times, that anyone who speaks of the broad front of failure and mendacity and carelessness of human life in so much of our public policy, in terms any louder than muted regret, is usually marginalized as some sort of radical—that is, as someone so "out of the mainstream" as not to be taken seriously. But I believe what I have described so far is an accurate and informed account of the present state of the Union.

We must ask if this rage to deconstruct the Constitution and the Bill of Rights has any connection with the prevalence of God in the mind of this worshipful President. We must ask to what extent, and at however unconscious a level, a conflict arises in the pious political mind when it is sworn to uphold the civil religion of the Constitution.

The idea of the United States may have had its sources in the European Enlightenment, but it was the actions taken by self-declared Americans that brought it into focus and established it as an entity. America is a society evolved from words written down on paper by ordinary mortals, however extraordinary they happened to be as human beings. When constitutional scholars speak of the American civil religion, they recognize that along with its separation of church and state our Constitution and its amendments establish as civil law ethical presumptions common to Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

But if you have extracted the basic ethics of religious invention and found the mechanism for installing them in the statutes of the secular civic order, but have consigned all the doctrine and rite and ritual, all the symbols and traditional practices, to the precincts of private life, you are saying there is no one proven path to salvation, there are only traditions. If you relegate the old stories to the personal choices of private worship, you admit the ineffable is ineffable, and in terms of a possible theological triumphalism, everything is up for grabs.

Our pluralism cannot be entirely comfortable to someone of evangelical faith. But to the extreme fundamentalist—that member of the evangelical community militant in his belief, an absolutist intolerant of all forms of belief but his own, all stories but his own—our pluralism has to be a profound offense. I speak of the so-called "political base" with which our President has bonded. In our raucous democracy, fundamentalist religious belief has organized itself with political acumen to promulgate law that would undermine just those secular humanist principles that encourage it to flourish in freedom. Of course, there has rarely been a period in our history when God has not been called upon to march. Northern abolitionists and Southern slave owners both claimed biblical endorsement. Martin Luther King Jr.'s civil rights movement drew its strength from prayer and examples of Christian fortitude, while the Ku Klux Klan invoked Jesus as a sponsor of its racism. But there is a crucial difference between these traditional invocations and the politically astute and well-funded activists of today's Christian right who do not call upon their faith to certify their politics as much as they call for a country that certifies their faith.

> We find ourselves living in a social and psychic structure of the ghostly past, with our great national needs going unmet.

Fundamentalism really cannot help itself—it is absolutist and can compromise with nothing, not even democracy.

I value the point of view of Professor Mark Noll, who speaks of the "historical American merger of the forces of traditional Christianity with the forces of Enlightenment." It is a serious misreading of American history, he says, "to portray the tangled cultural and political conflicts of our time as pitting the pre-critical hordes of religion against the hypercritical avatars of science." Historically there has tended to be a religious accommodation of science, according to Professor Noll: in nineteenth-century America, theological conservatives could also be Darwinists. And even in the strident debates of today, fundamentalists still proclaim their allegiance to facts as loudly as their opponents. And theories such as intelligent design and creation science implicitly accept the modern scientific consensus on evolution while maintaining a confident belief in a traditional deity.

But all contrarian movements, like revolutions, devolve to their extremist expression, do they not? The theorists of creation science and intelligent design have marching on their right flank, with or without their approval, if not pre-critical hordes of religion, a militantly censorious, well-funded political movement that a President of the United States has tapped into for his and their benefit. I am not aware that American history as invoked by Professor Noll has a precedent for this. Nor am I aware that the hypercritical avatars of the secular scientific method have an equivalent hard-nosed political organization behind them.

The President has said the war with terrorists will last for decades and is a confrontation between "good and evil." Whether he means the evil of specific terrorist organizations or the culture from which they spring, his vision is necessarily Manichaean. There is immense political power in such religiously inspired reductionism. Thus, no matter how he lies

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about the reason for his invasion of Iraq, or how badly it has gone, bumblingly and tragically ruinous, with so many lives destroyed, and no matter how many thousands of terrorists it has brought into being, to criticize his policy or the architects of it is said to aid the enemy. The President's inner circle of advisers, who conspire in this Manichaean worldview, have the unnatural vividness of personality of Shakespearean plotters. While the original think-tank theorists and proponents of the war have quietly and understandably withdrawn from public view, the Vice President and the President's chief policy adviser have stood tall—the first contemptuous of his critics, his denials of reality and obfuscations delivered in the dour tones of unquestionable authority, the second too clever by half, and because he spent his years developing a theocratic constituency and wearing such blinders as an exclusive concern with party power has attached to him, most clearly has a future in the culture of antidemocracy he has so deviously and unwisely nurtured.

As Manichaean politics reduces the relevance of knowledge and degrades the truth that knowledge discovers. The past seven years of American political life are an uncanny cycle we've slipped into, or slid into, that foresees the democratic traditions of this country as too much of a luxury to be maintained. We have seen, since the 2006 election, the struggle for the legislative branches to regain some of their constitutional prerogatives. They struggle not only with a recalcitrant President and Vice President who impugn their motives but against the precedents of the imperial presidencies of Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, each of whom added another conservative shock to the principle of separation of powers. Many of the executive practices today—the blatant cronyism, the political uses of the Justice Department, the evisceration of regulatory agencies and so on—are empowered by these precedents. And so we have marched along from the imperial presidency to the borders of authoritarianism.

To take the long view, American politics may be seen as the struggle between the idealistic secular democracy of a fearlessly self-renewing America and our great resident capacity to be in denial of what is intellectually and morally incumbent upon us to pursue.

Melville in *Moby-Dick* speaks of reality outracing apprehension. Apprehension in the sense not of fear or disquiet but of understanding… reality as too much for us to take in, as, for example, the white whale is too much for the Pequod and its captain. It may be that our new century is an awesomely complex white whale—scientifically in our quantumized wave particles and the manipulable stem cells of our biology, ecologically in our planetary crises of nature, technologically in our humanoid molecular computers, sexually in the rising number of our genders, intellectually in the paradoxes of our texts, and so on.

What is more natural than to rely on the saving powers of simplism? Perhaps with our dismal public conduct, so shot through with piety, we are actually engaged in a genetic engineering venture that will make a slower, dumber, more sluggish whale, one that can be harpooned and flensed, tried and boiled to light our candles. A kind of water wonderworld whale made of racism, nativism, cultural illiteracy, fundamentalist fantasy and the righteous priorities of wealth.

I summon up the year 1787, when the Constitutional Convention had done its work, and the drafted Constitution was sent out to the states for ratification. The public's excitement was palpable. Extended and vigorous statehouse debates echoed through the towns and villages, and as, one by one, the states voted to ratify, church bells rang, cheers went up from the public houses, and in the major cities the people turned out to parade with a fresh new sense of themselves as a nation. Everyone marched—tradespeople, workingmen, soldiers, women and clergy. They had floats in those days, too—most often a wagon-sized ship of state called the Union, rolling through the streets with children waving from the scuppers. Philadelphia came up with a float called the New Roof, a dome supported by thirteen pillars and ornamented with stars. It was drawn by ten white horses, and at the top was a handsome cupola surmounted by a figure of Plenty bearing her cornucopia. The ratification parades were sacramental—symbolic venerations, acts of faith. From the beginning, people saw the Constitution as a kind of sacred text for a civil society.

> To look not up for some celestial accreditation but forward, in the endless journey to resist authoritarian restrictions—that is our civil religion.

And with good reason: the ordaining voice of the Constitution is scriptural, but in resolutely keeping the authority for its dominion in the public consent, it presents itself as the sacred text of secular humanism.

When the ancient Hebrews broke their covenant, they suffered a loss of identity and brought disaster on themselves. Our burden, too, is covenantal. We may point to our 200-some years of national survival as an open society; we may regard ourselves as an exceptionalist, historically self-correcting nation, whose democratic values locate us just as surely as our geography—and yet we know at the same time that all through our history we have brutally excluded vast numbers of us from the shelter of the New Roof, we have broken our covenant again and again with a virtuosity verging on damnation and have been saved only by the sacrificial efforts of Constitution-reverencing patriots in and out of government—presidents, senators, justices, self-impoverishing lawyers, abolitionists, muckrakers, third-party candidates, suffragists, union organizers, striking workers, civil rights martyrs.

Because this President's subversion of the Constitution outdoes anything that has gone before, and as it has created large social constituencies ready to support the flag-waving ideals of an incremental fascism, we're called upon to step forward to reaffirm our covenant like these exemplars from the past.

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Philosopher Richard Rorty has suggested in his book *Achieving Our Country* that the metaphysic of America's civil religion is pragmatism and its prophets are Walt Whitman and John Dewey. "The most striking feature of their redescription of our country is its thoroughgoing secularism," says Rorty. "The moral we should draw from the European past, and in particular from Christianity, is not instruction about the authority under which we should live but suggestions about how to make ourselves wonderfully different from anything that has been."

To temporize human affairs, to look not up for some applied celestial accreditation but forward, at ground level, in the endless journey to resist any authoritarian restrictions on thought or suppression of knowledge that is the public good—that is the essence of our civil religion.

It is Whitman, our great poet and pragmatic philosopher, who advises us not to be curious about God but to affix our curiosity to our own lives and the earth we live on, and then perhaps as far as we can see into the universe with our telescopes. This was the charge he gave himself, and it is the source of all the attentive love in his poetry. If we accept it as our own and decide something is right after all in a democracy that is given to a degree of free imaginative expression that few cultures in the world can tolerate, we can hope for the aroused witness, the manifold reportage, the flourishing of knowledge that will restore us to ourselves, awaken the dulled sense of our people to the public interest that is their interest, and vindicate the genius of the humanist sacred text that embraces us all. ■

# Letters

*(continued from page 2)*
facilities run. The result has been lower staff turnover and better care for our residents, a top priority for me and my SEIU brothers and sisters.
Bruce McCutcheon

Los Angeles
I commend Esther Kaplan for tackling such a complex subject, but she did not go far enough in criticizing SEIU. Its tactic of making deals with business in order to secure contracts may grow its membership, but at what cost? At the cost of prohibiting rank-and-filers from organizing new members and from striking? That defeats the purpose of having a union in the first place.

And since when is having *any* contract more important than fighting for a *good* one? Workers should not be lying down whenever SEIU tells them to, just because it's a labor union. That's UHW president Sal Rosselli's point and that of SEIU's reform group, SMART. Andy Stern's repudiation of efforts by SEIU organizers and members to retain their independence, his top-down approach in negotiating contracts and his capitulation to corporations goes against the very core of basic organizing principles.

For some, the militance and audacity of the California Nurses Association was a breath of fresh air after Stern's questionable tactics. But the behavior of the nurses' union in Ohio, and its equally top-down (and quite fascistic) approach to organizing (disclaimer: I once worked as an organizer there), is no cause to celebrate. Instead of allowing SEIU and CNA to frame the debate, we must look to radical labor models to find a path to better working conditions and worker strength.
Leilani Albano

## *Our Bodies*: Alive & Well

Roxbury, Vt.
It is splendid that Linda Gordon's "Translating *Our Bodies, Ourselves*" [June 16] highlighted Kathy Davis's prizewinning book while describing the national and international women's health movement and the origins, impact and travels of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (*OBOS*). Gordon describes a time of hope and activism that we loved being a part of. The article refers to a misconception about *OBOS* that left the impression that it was meant to be "read by an individual in private." But the 1970 preface to *Women and Their Bodies* states, "These papers should be viewed as a tool which stimulates discussion and action, which allows for new ideas and for change" within group discussions "in harmony, sharing, arguing, disagreeing. It was exciting to talk about how we could act together on our collective knowledge to change the health care system for women and all people."

We saw the resulting book as a living instrument of knowledge, a facilitator of communication and an agent of change. In fact, it was our constant dialogue with one another and with the hundreds of women who responded that expanded the book's depth and scope over a period of four decades. The methodology (at the outset developed almost accidentally) of connecting personal experiences to the broader society enabled each of the many women's groups here and abroad to repeat the process on their own terrain. They created new books and other materials to fit their specific cultural and political circumstances. We have welcomed all these exciting developments. Note that the OBOS organization is alive and well, with a diverse and dedicated staff. Check out our website and blog at ourbodiesourselves.org). Contribute information (and funds, if possible)—and rejoice with us that *OBOS* has taken on so many different lives of its own.
Jane Pincus, Norma Swenson, Judy Norsigian, Nancy Miriam Hawley, Joan Ditzion
*Founders, Our Bodies, Ourselves*

## John Adams, Always a Pleasure

Richmond, Va.
After watching HBO's *John Adams* and reading Nicholas Guyatt's insightful review ["Adams Ribbed," June 16], my thoughts turned to Jack Shepard's 1975 book *The Adams Chronicles* and the Emmy-winning WGBH miniseries starring George Grizzard, now on DVD. Grizzard's portrayal of Adams was sufficiently gripping that I still recall a few scenes, including a hilarious battle with Ben Franklin in Paris about the merits of fresh night air. Maybe it was Grizzard's raspy voice or the glint in his eyes as he darted into a moment of irascible independence, but Grizzard seemed particularly well cast to capture some of the essence of Adams the person, to the extent that ever-imperfect historical records convey it.
William E. Cooper

## Clarification

The illustration for last week's cover story, "Loving McCain," by Eric Alterman with George Zornick, featured *Newsweek*'s Fareed Zakaria, who has written some of the strongest foreign policy critiques of the GOP nominee. *The Nation* regrets the editorial error.

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# Books & the Arts.

## Hello Cruel World

**by JOHN PALATTELLA**

The Nevada Test Site is a ghost town of the cold war. A little larger than Rhode Island and about an hour's drive northwest of Las Vegas, it lies among volcanic mountains and dry riverbeds, and is cordoned off by miles of fence. Several years ago David Samuels paid a visit to the old nuclear proving ground while writing an article for *Harper's* about "caging the dragon," the process of designing, triggering and studying contained nuclear explosions. Samuels peered into the Sedan Crater, which still radiates energy from the detonation of a 104-kiloton nuclear bomb in 1962. He interviewed technicians who had readied and triggered the bombs and fabricated the imaginary towns they obliterated. He toured a complex of subterranean tunnels built beneath the desert as a reusable home for nuclear tests. And he learned about the production of plutonium and how scientists had devised a way to estimate the size of a nuclear explosion by measuring the refraction of light in the mantle of glass that blooms from rock in an explosion's blast furnace. The site's terrain is mind-boggling, and Samuels manages to keep his cool while exploring it. There's one thing that does shake him up, though, which is learning that the 1,054 American nuclear tests conducted at the site, and the countless hours and untold sums of money spent designing and analyzing them with elaborate computer programs, in the end yielded "less than a single second's worth of usable data." The smallness of the accomplishment is staggering.

The accomplishments of Samuels's article about the test site, "Buried Suns," and the new book in which he's gathered that piece and eighteen others are also staggering, but in a much larger sense. In *Only Love Can Break Your Heart*, Samuels examines what he calls the "process of destruction and renewal by which American culture is made." What he discovered as he crisscrossed the country for a decade, going from New York City to Nevada to Oregon and many points in between, is the "shared cosmic joke" of postwar American life—that the national dream of self-transformation and self-perfection is a recipe for delusional thinking and self-destruction. Along the way Samuels encounters a few folks who, thanks to a rare combination of chance, fortitude, delusion and poise, have managed to beat highly unfavorable odds and dodge the wrecking ball. There's Stevie Wonder: "Where Michael Jackson mutilated his face and skin, Stevie Wonder was blessed by nature with a disability that made him better able to understand and live with the deeper fictions that support our national life." There's a freshly winged pilot of the Goodyear blimp: "As a kid, I used to love watching Disney on Sunday night—a world that was just happy and peaceful—even for an hour," says John Conrad. "Well, that's exactly what it feels like up here." And there's the DJ and hip-hop producer Prince Paul: his "records are the sonic equivalents of the bits of found paper or plastic or candy bar wrappers that a suburban Picasso might use to make a collage for his fifth-grade class."

This small fraternity of "tender-hearted isolates" is outnumbered in Samuels's America by an assortment of drifters, dead-enders, grumblers, dark angels, parched souls, failures and frauds. The supernova of this crew is James Hogue, a serial imposter whose most audacious con was getting accepted to Princeton in 1988 under the alias Alexi Indris-Santana, a self-educated cowboy and track star, and whose story Samuels tells in another new book, *The Runner*. Hogue's scam was discovered in 1991, and after being prosecuted for defrauding Princeton Hogue pursued various small- and big-time cons, first at Harvard, where he was nabbed stealing gems from a museum where he worked under a pseudonym as a security guard, and then in Telluride, Colorado, where over the

LENNOX McLENDON/ASSOCIATED PRESS

After forty-four years in business, the Sands Hotel was imploded early on the morning of November 26, 1996, in Las Vegas.

**Only Love Can Break Your Heart**
By David Samuels.
New Press. 372 pp. $26.95.

**The Runner**
*A True Account of the Amazing Lies and Fantastical Adventures of the Ivy League Imposter James Hogue.*
By David Samuels.
New Press. 176 pp. $22.95.

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course of several years he morphed through a menu of identities (engineer, master carpenter, stunt skier, purveyor of custom-built safes) as he preyed on wealthy ski bums and prosperous locals. (A significant portion of *The Runner* first appeared in *The New Yorker* in 2001, where Hogue was inducted into the tribe of artful liars profiled there, including Joe Gould, by Joseph Mitchell in 1942 and '64, and Brett Kimberlin, by Mark Singer in 1992 and '96.) Like *Only Love Can Break Your Heart*, *The Runner* is filled with people whose lives are "pervaded by the daily aftertaste of inconceivable destructive power." They all are trying to survive the fallout from their own Sedan Crater, and Samuels's dispatches about their lives shimmer with the casual artistry of Prince Paul's sound collages and the hardened luster of glass shards pried from Nevada blast pits.

Samuels took up magazine writing in earnest the mid-1990s, when he returned to the United States after covering the Balkan wars for *Harper's* and found himself marooned in a land of Mini-Moos. "I remember sitting at the counter of my local diner and being entranced by the large number of gold-foil-covered creamers that came in a bowl along with my coffee," he explains in the preface to *Only Love Can Break Your Heart*. Samuels took the overabundance of Mini-Moos as a sign of the ersatz prosperity of the Golden '90s, "a historical sweet spot so creamy and rich and frosted with so many layers of delusional thinking that dwelling on that moment for too long is guaranteed to induce an immediate diabetic coma. Knit together by an invisible web of beneficent new technologies like cell phones and e-mail, everyone in the world was getting rich." But the cornucopia of shiny gadgets and virtual connections couldn't dispel Samuels's yawning sense of existential drift:

> The stories that I shared with my peers, who grew up in the seventies, were about working mothers and fathers who got angry, absented themselves, or got divorced. We joined together in a generation-wide regression to childhood where we could at last feel safe, because we were now adults and were no longer living at home. We ate Kraft macaroni and cheese for dinner and stayed up late and got high and watched whatever crap was on television.

His peers did share something besides an appetite for stuff from a box. Like Samuels, they searched "for a point where inner and outer equilibrium could find a proper balance."

The distressed and deracinated soul-searching for a sense of grounding is a recurring subject of modern literature and journalism, which is why it seems shortsighted for Samuels's publisher and other reviewers to compare him to Tom Wolfe and Joan Didion. Why is it that more than forty years after the New Journalists broke into the game, and with a younger generation of journalists like Ted Conover, Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, Kate Boo and others working in fresh and innovative directions, the work of Wolfe and Didion remains the only benchmark for narrative long-form journalism? It's true that Samuels begins the preface to *Only Love Can Break Your Heart* by echoing the most brazen observation from Wolfe's preface to the 1973 anthology *The New Journalism*—that journalists, not novelists, are the authors of "the most important literature being written in America today." Aside from that, and a few other jolts of gonzo brio in his preface, Samuels has very little in common with Wolfe. Samuels has written fiction; in his preface he mentions the "desiccated corpse" of an abandoned novel, and he recently told the *New York Observer* that he's writing a second novel. In his journalism, though, he hasn't followed the example of Wolfe and other novelists like Truman Capote and Norman Mailer, who tested the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction. Nor does Samuels harbor any anxiety over the literary status of journalism, which he serenely calls "the mongrel art of writing literature on deadline." He may be working on another novel, but he wraps up the preface to *Only Love Can Break Your Heart* with the admission that writing for magazines is the only kind of life he knows.

Like Wolfe, Samuels is keenly interested in examining prosperity and social status. *The Runner* is, among other things, a study of how Hogue managed to game the status anxieties of the American class system and its elite institutions. But unlike Wolfe, Samuels isn't fixated on social status, and in this light it's instructive to consider what kind of material he leaves out of his work. "The Blind Man and the Elephant" is a remarkable story about Stevie Wonder, the Rolling Stones and the spectacle of Super Bowl XL in Detroit. The Stones played the halftime show, and Stevie was added to the bill as the opening act after the citizens of his hometown denounced the NFL for not having asked any of Motown's many great black musicians to jam. Samuels concludes the piece with some impressions of the post-game scene. His eyes sweeping across the locker room of the winning team (the Pittsburgh Steelers), he notes that "lithe blacks in bathrobes roam the locker room, bumping fists with mountainous whites with purple legs and tiny jockstraps." That sentence terminates a paragraph. Wolfe most likely would have extended the description by rummaging through the clothes in the players' lockers to pinpoint their social status; then he would have somehow converted all those tiny jockstraps into props for an episode of testosterone seizures. Samuels simply provides a modest glimpse of camaraderie.

When Samuels writes portraiture, he blends dialogue and observed detail in a manner that is insightful and aesthetically pleasing. Here he is describing an afternoon drive with Bill "the Spaceman" Lee, an all-star relief pitcher who played for the Boston Red Sox in the 1970s:

> The Spaceman loves driving. He knows the roads of Vermont like the back of his hand. "That's Mount Mansfield right through there," he says. "That's the highest point in Vermont." On our way back from Montreal, he calls out the name of every tree that he passes, oak, maple, birch, lemon spruce, white pines, a Whitmanesque litany that leads him in turn to naming the different types of rocks that make up a mountain, which leads in turn to the deeper subject of geological time. Man is only a speck in the universe, he observes, before returning back to earth. "That's a sugar house," he says. When you find a moth in your syrup bucket, he adds, that's when you know that maple syrup season is over.

The cadences of the declarative sentences, at first staccato, then languid, create an enticing gentle rhythm. The image of the moth trapped in syrup foreshadows the story's concluding scene, in which Lee's car gets stuck in mud at the top of a Vermont mountain, a predicament that symbolizes his difficulties with his family and baseball. A delicate mosaic of an individual sensibility, Samuels's description of Lee is a journalistic prose poem (least of all because it mentions Whitman). It's also the antithesis of Wolfe's overwrought, clamorous prose.

In a 2005 appreciation of Joan Didion's career that appeared in *The New York Review of Books*, John Leonard offers an EKG of her novels and essays: "Didion has always juxtaposed the hardware and the soft: hummingbirds and the FBI; nightmares of infant death and the light at dawn for a Pacific bomb test.... Against the 'hydraulic imagery' of the clandestine world,

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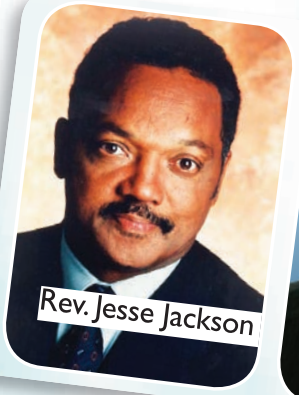
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its conduits and pipelines and diversions, she opposes a gravitational imagery of black holes and weightlessness." Like Didion, Samuels investigates the vortex of American life, a feeling of weightlessness and existential drift that can swallow people whole, but he reports on it in an entirely different manner.

Didion has often reminded me of the character of Tod Hackett in Nathanael West's novel *The Day of the Locust*: the sensitive aesthete trying to break into Hollywood by remaining on the edge of the crowd, nerves bruised into forming delicate observations about people made savage and bitter by power, boredom and disappointment. While Samuels keeps some critical distance between himself and his subjects, he doesn't hesitate from lunging into the scrum. In "The Blind Man and the Elephant," he mingles with the crowd outside the stadium gates and hangs out with support crew in the stadium's bowels during the game. (One imagines Didion observing the game from the NFL commissioner's skybox or a network's satellite truck.) In "Bringing Down the House," a fascinating account of the demolition of the Sands Hotel published in 1997, he divides his time between the drifters washing up in the bars and parking lots of Las Vegas and the demo crew meticulously preparing the Sands for implosion. The crew grows so fond of Samuels that they let him throw the detonator switch for a test blast: "on the count of five I flick the second and final silver switch, an act that is instantly rewarded by a rush of pure adrenaline to my brain and a boom that resonates in the center of my chest."

One virtue of such close-to-the-skin reporting is that it often immunizes Samuels against condescension, especially the sort that has periodically starched Didion's sentences with a crisp severity, as in this late-'60s snapshot of Joan Baez: "So now the girl whose life is a crystal teardrop has her own place, a place where the sun shines and the ambiguities can be set aside a little while longer." Instead of studying crystal teardrops, Samuels throws a spotlight on the "sucker's ballet" of Americans struggling to make sly and small improvements on the limitations of the given without being swallowed whole by their own or someone else's imposture or fraud.

For the most part, his subjects aren't protagonists in a culture war or political battles. *Only Love Can Break Your Heart* has just two pieces on politics: a story about how the press was mostly hoodwinked by the Pentagon's disinformation campaign in the early stages of the invasion of Afghanistan and a piece about the dismal stagecraft of a fundraiser for George W. Bush during the 2004 election. Samuels is drawn to middle-class strivers and lower-class knockabouts stuck in pedestrian struggles. In "400,000 Salesmen Can't Be Wrong!" he hangs out with Ed Kustanovich, a middle-aged Russian immigrant and structural engineer who, desperate to improve his station in life, is lured into a get-rich-quick scheme operated by an outfit called ACN. The company offers what it calls "the Opportunity," a chance for strivers like Kustanovich to augment their income by selling a utilities package promising low rates in newly deregulated energy and telecommunications markets. But the Opportunity is a pyramid scheme: only the people at the top make money, by investing the $499 joining fee collected from each new sales rep. As an apostate ACN member tells Samuels, the Opportunity is "a way of controlling people's minds by exploiting their capacity for belief."

Samuels brushed against a similar Opportunity at Woodstock '99. There, "the selfishness and irresponsibility of the promoters"—old hippies gone daft—turned a three-day "prepackaged Information Age Happening" attended by 225,000 concertgoers into an orgy of violence. That year Samuels also visited Derby Lane Greyhound Park in St. Petersburg, Florida. It's ten years after the introduction of a state lottery and other forms of legalized gambling in Florida, which have cut deeply into dog tracks' revenues. The track owners reacted by increasing their percentage of the skim from the betting pool. As Samuels explains in the title piece of *Only Love Can Break Your Heart*, that move created such unfavorable odds that the purpose of the dog tracks essentially became "the extraction of ready cash from the dwindling local population of retirees, single mothers, deadbeats, scam artists, and liars." The Opportunity is revealed to be naked desperation at the dog track, where, Samuels writes, "America's belief in good luck goes to die."

Opportunities and sucker's ballets flourished during the age of the Mini-Moos, but in reality neither is unique to the '90s. They're primeval elements of American life, part of an existential vortex whose origins can be traced back at least to the early decades of the nineteenth century, as Samuels explained in a 1999 *New Yorker* piece about Gilded Age confidence men (it is not included in the current collection). "If the dream of self-invention was profoundly democratic," he writes, "it was also an open invitation to fraud." One reason Samuels is fascinated by James Hogue is that the long-distance runner and con man, tricked out in an identity tailored to the dimensions of his marks' credulity, is the American vortex incarnate. "The record of James Hogue's life is marked by blank spaces, and by a series of deliberate distortions and erasures," Samuels writes. He notes that when the police arrived at Princeton to arrest Hogue, their suspect was attending a geology lecture about "large-scale structural phenomena such as faulting and folding that are associated with violent ruptures in the surface of the earth."

The point is subtle and unmistakable. The American dream of self-invention—"I wanted to start all over again, without the burdens of my past," Hogue told one of the booking officers—is not only part of the birthright of every American, according to Samuels, but also inseparable from formidable forces of destruction. Around the time I began reading *The Runner* and *Only Love Can Break Your Heart*, the *New York Times* published a perky front-page item about how high school students at Boston Latin are taught *The Great Gatsby* as an inspirational story about striving for your dreams. Samuels mentions that Hogue, too, had read *Gatsby* in his teens, and his depiction of the dark sinews of Hogue's character squashes the glorification of *Gatsby* like a gnat. The novelist who created Jay Gatsby—who in the book is the child of the imagination of the hayseed-turned-bootlegger Jay Gatz—would have understood.

Because *The Runner* is a book about con games and lies, Samuels occasionally turns it into a meditation on the morally dubious aspects of journalism. "The question of how writers come to appropriate the lives of the people they write about is a tricky one," he says. "While it is facile to equate journalism with lying, it is also true that both actions share in common an unpleasantly instrumental approach to people and to language that diminishes the common store of trust. The subject has no power to alter a reporter's approach to his or her subject, or to take back a single word that they said." Samuels's reservations recall those expressed by Janet Malcolm in the famous opening sentences of *The Journalist and the Murderer*: "Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible. He is a kind of confidence man, preying on people's vanity, ignorance, or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse." For Malcolm, Hogue would be the perfect subject, a one-way mirror for endless self-scrutiny; for Samuels, however, while remorseless acts of imposture and dissembling similar to Hogue's are traps that can snare any journalist, they are not unavoidable ones. If anything, Samuels's articles are a reminder that Malcolm's charge about journalism

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Ask The Expert

# We Know You Want To ... But *Can* You?

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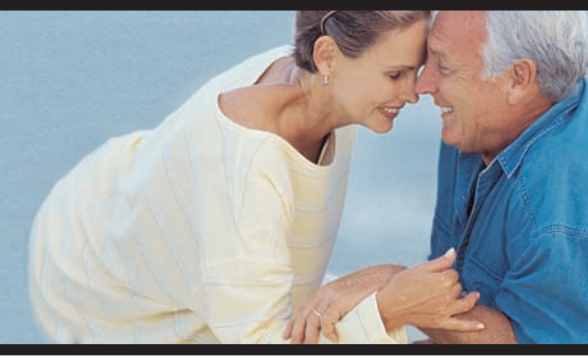

**Q: Dear Steffanie,**
***My husband and I have always enjoyed an active sex life. Now that the children are grown, we've been able to share more intimate, spontaneous moments. But sometimes these special moments are interrupted by my husband's inability to be consistently "in the mood" when it matters most. Steffanie, getting older isn't stopping this couple - erratic performance is. I know there are pills for this sort of thing but my husband is leery of trying a pill because of some other minor health concerns. Can you recommend anything else?***

*"Ready and Waiting"*

**A: Dear Readers,**
Sometimes when I find a statistic floating around the media, I have certain doubts about the legitimacy of the results. For instance, when a political poll is taken about candidates or their policies I understand that whoever conducted that poll probably has an agenda and the outcome skewed accordingly.

Other times, however, results come from a completely neutral, totally unbiased, and trusted source that's dependable. Such was the case very recently when the New England Journal of Medicine published a federally funded study conducted by respected scientists about the sexual activity of men and women between 57-85 years old.[1]

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Among respondents who were sexually active, the frequency of sex was lower among those who were 75-85 years of age than among younger persons. However, even in this oldest-age group, 54% of sexually active persons reported having sex at least 2-3 times per month, and 23% reported having sex once a week or more - that's 77% still having sex regularly into their 80's![1] But the bottom line is that a healthy and active sex life does NOT have to end at a random age just because society assumes it does. People in their 50's and 60's want to engage in intimate relations but as the age increases, **the question isn't about whether or not you want to – but can you?**

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1. 2007, Massachusetts Medical Society. New England Journal of Medicine 2007;357:762-74.

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always being "morally indefensible" is something of an exaggeration. As Samuels explains in *Only Love Can Break Your Heart*, the greatest threat to journalistic truth is not necessarily a writer betraying a subject or a story being "filtered through the individual sensibility of a writer." Rather, it's "the self-enclosed space of 'news' reporting" that provides a buffet of canned political opinions and heaping portions of calorie-free tidbits about matters of great importance like a celebrity's most recent DWI or the vapid musings of a vampish ex-blogger.

Where Malcolm sees a moral impasse, which she cultivates with indefatigable reporting and fertilizes with pitiless irony, Samuels sees moral ambiguity and relies on indefatigable reporting to try to surmount it. Samuels followed Hogue's story for nearly fifteen years. His first account of the con man appeared in the *Washington Post* in 1995. His *New Yorker* piece about Hogue was published six years later, and *The Runner* seven years after that. It's a story that took Samuels to Princeton, Telluride and Hogue's hometown in Kansas, that led him to public records and private papers and demanded that he clock many hours with Hogue's childhood friends, Princeton classmates and Colorado marks. All the stories in *Only Love Can Break Your Heart* were written over the course of weeks and months instead of years, but they are just as much the product of solid reporting. Even when Samuels covers a short event like Woodstock '99, he manages to tell a story rich with conversation, color and conflict; he immerses himself in a place and characterizes its mood. This explains why one doesn't find anywhere in his writing the false notes of intimacy that litter the pages of magazines, those sentences in which a reporter drops the name of the hip restaurant where an interview occurred over a lunch of Kobe beef and wild mushroom martinis, or treats the contents of a handbag or an iPod as a window into a subject's soul. Such sentences are written to make us believe the writer to be a citizen of the subject's world, when in fact all the writer has is a tourist visa or a lunch pass.

By blending extensive research with what Gay Talese has called "the fine art of hanging out," Samuels often manages to connect meaningfully with his subjects and depict their messy lives with sympathy, insight and grace. He writes with a delicately modulated voice, one that, like the lyrics on Neil Halstead's *Sleeping on Roads* (which Samuels notes he once found addictive), "privileges tenderness over anger and resignation over bite." Yet he is no fetishist of the fringe. When Samuels visits the Derby Lane Greyhound Park, he spends a lot of time hanging out with Jay Sizemore, the manager of the track and the lender of last resort for regulars fighting a long streak of hard luck. At one point Sizemore philosophizes about why the touts and valets make their daily pilgrimage to the dingy Derby Lane, and his explanation of their relationship to the track refers equally to the complicated bonds that link Samuels to Sizemore and the other kindred spirits in these two alluring books: "It's like a family.... You're supposed to learn from experience in life, but life's too short to learn from your own experiences.... So when I think about it, I guess I understand why you're here." ■

# The American Way of Spying

**by SPENCER ACKERMAN**

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Anchor. 812 pp. Paper $16.95.

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*The Decline and Fall of the CIA.*
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On February 14 Thomas Fingar, chief analyst of the eighteen-agency US intelligence community, gave a speech at the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco. Not the most public of public servants, Fingar, a longtime intelligence analyst, stepped out of the shadows before a respectful audience to defend his much-maligned colleagues. "You want it real bad, you sometimes get it real bad. And the Iraq WMD estimate falls in that category," Fingar said. He was referring to the dismal measure by which CIA analysis is now judged: the calamitous ninety-three-page National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction that the intelligence community produced in October 2002. "It was requested. We were given a two-week period in which to produce it. And it was bad. It was really bad.... The percentage of analysts who participated in the production of that hurry-up, get-it-out-the-door-in-two-weeks product was tiny compared to the larger set, all of whom were tarred with the same brush of incompetence."

More notable than the aggrieved tone of Fingar's address was its extremely selective account of the events leading up to the creation of that infamous NIE. In mid-2002, Bob Graham, the Democratic chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee, received classified briefings on Iraq from then–CIA Director George Tenet. Behind closed doors, Tenet presented a much less alarming picture of Iraq than the one George W. Bush gave the public. But Graham, concerned about an impending push from the White House to authorize war, soon learned the Bush Administration had not ordered the CIA to prepare an NIE on Iraq, indicating to him that the Administration's position on Iraq was not guided by the intelligence. Invoking rarely used senatorial authority, Graham formally requested an NIE—before the war vote. If Graham was guilty of anything, it was not hostility to CIA analysts, as Fingar insinuated, but suspicion of White House manipulation of intelligence, and CIA complicity. As Graham explained several years later in a *Washington Post* op-ed, "Particular skepticism was raised" by the NIE "about aluminum tubes that were offered as evidence Iraq was reconstituting its nuclear program. As to [Saddam] Hussein's will to use whatever weapons he might have, the estimate indicated he would not do so unless he was first attacked." What's more, "Most of the alleged intelligence came from Iraqi exiles or third countries, all of which had an interest in the United States' removing Hussein, by force if necessary." To save the intelligence community from public embarrassment in the face of such revelations, lies like Fingar's have been, since the creation of the modern intelligence apparatus, a cost of doing business.

Fingar, incidentally, is one of the intelligence community's brightest analytical lights. He has a sterling reputation for integrity. During the NIE process in 2002, he was second-in-command of the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, known as INR. A relative backwater with a laughably small slice of the $50 billion annual intelligence budget, INR is the subject

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of consistent disrespect from the CIA. Yet INR has perhaps the best analytic record of any component of the community. Fingar did not need to say in San Francisco what intelligence observers have known for years: his old shop was the only agency that dissented from the 2002 NIE's consensus that Saddam was building a nuclear bomb.

Indeed, INR is a story of what might have been. Harry Truman, who presided over the creation of the modern US intelligence apparatus, famously said that what he sought was a secret newspaper, something that would divine the hidden agendas and developments of mysterious foreign actors in the dawning cold war. This is what, essentially, INR produces. But what Truman got was something more suited to what his cold war policies required: a sprawling apparatus devoted to covert action, subterfuge, disinformation and lawlessness. Once upon a time, the agency was candid about what it needed to be. "Hitherto acceptable norms of human conduct do not apply," wrote Gen. Jimmy Doolittle in a secret 1954 report for Dwight D. Eisenhower about revamping the CIA's covert actions. "We must develop effective espionage and counterespionage services and must learn to subvert, sabotage and destroy our enemies by more clever, more sophisticated and more effective methods than those used against us. It may become necessary that the American people be made acquainted with, understand and support this fundamentally repugnant philosophy."

The CIA got its amorality, as a Senate panel reminded us June 17 when it revealed a pungent piece of advice delivered by a CIA lawyer in 2002 to officials at Guantánamo Bay curious about state-of-the-art interrogation methods: "If the detainee dies," said Jonathan Fredman of the CIA's counterterrorist center, "then you're doing it wrong." But what the agency never acquired was competence. Its history is one of profound failure in two respects: first, operational failure, as its efforts at pulling the puppet strings of the world have usually ended up garroting its allies; second, the agency, fearful above all else of dismemberment by politicians outraged by its appalling track record, has lied with pathological consistency to Presidents and Congresses about its failed missions. An attempt to bump off the Syrian leadership in 1957 resulted in the interrogation and exposure of the CIA's Damascus chief, Roger Stone, within weeks. The agency fooled itself into believing a ragtag band of counterrevolutionaries could topple Fidel Castro in 1961, and followed up its disaster with years of aborted assassination attempts. A fear that the Iraqi coup


DEMOCRACY'S PRISONER
EUGENE V. DEBS, THE GREAT WAR, AND THE RIGHT TO DISSENT
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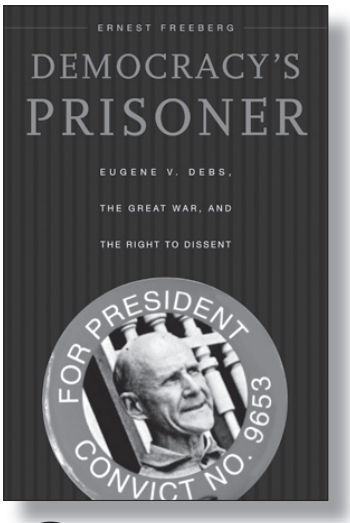


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of Nuri Said in 1958 would give the Soviets access to the Middle East's oil bounty led CIA area chief James Critchfield to sponsor a countercoup by an up-and-coming political force called the Baath Party.

It is not enough, however, to focus on the performance of the CIA or its partner agencies, as Fingar rightfully suggested. The CIA is what it is—an unaccountable, dysfunctional and occasionally amoral entity—because America is what it is. If the CIA can't understand foreign cultures, it's because America does not educate its citizens to understand foreign cultures. If the CIA can't see the future, it's because America, despite its imperial pretenses, isn't omniscient. If the CIA can't control the course of foreign events, it's because America is ambivalent about its status as a superpower. To be shrill about it, the CIA is both a symptom and an accelerant of American imperialism. As several recent books make clear, for all the commissions about reforming the intelligence community, nothing about the CIA will change until America gets out of the empire business. What's worse is the inconvenient truth that as long as imperial America remains, to dismember or destroy the CIA will only strengthen the fortunes of right-wing militarists within American politics.

HENRY GRIFFIN/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Frank Church, John Tower and a poison dart gun at a 1975 Senate probe of the CIA

From the beginning of the cold war, a consensus grew within the Truman Administration—entirely in secret—that success in shouldering the United States' newly assumed hegemonic responsibilities required a secret agency. The agency rose out of the ashes of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), a ramshackle but romantic gentlemen's covert-action club assembled by Franklin Roosevelt to perform the dirty work of winning World War II. Truman didn't want to institutionalize the OSS for the cold war, yet the only people with experience in the shadows to staff the espionage organization he wanted were OSS veterans, and they quickly took charge of the nascent agency. These unsentimental elitists did not wait for Congress to authorize such an entity through legislation, since they were used to simply taking the money they needed and doing as they pleased. State Department appropriations became slush funds to finance disinformation efforts, bribe foreign officials and pay for three-martini lunches in European capitals. By the time Congress passed an act creating the CIA in 1949, the agency had already become a playground for paranoid alcoholics like Frank Wisner and James Jesus Angleton to tinker with the US-Soviet balance in Europe. The only ironclad provision in the agency's deliberately vague charter was that it could not spy on US citizens domestically. John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon ordered the CIA to violate that prohibition.

The CIA's successes were meager. After numerous "missteps"—which, in practice, meant getting local proxies killed—the CIA managed to oust Jacobo Arbenz of Guatemala and Mohammed Mossadegh of Iran. Perhaps the agency's most competent director, Richard Helms, kept the criminally insane Angleton on as head of counterintelligence because he stopped the Soviets from penetrating the agency's highest levels. Meanwhile, Angleton told nearly every secret the agency had about its European assets to his drinking buddy, the Soviet agent Kim Philby. To call the CIA comically incompetent in its early years would be to diminish the considerable achievements of Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin. In 1950 William Wolf Weisband, an employee in the CIA's cryptanalysis division whose job was to translate intercepted Soviet communications, gave the agency's code-breaking secrets to the USSR. The catastrophe had more than one fateful consequence: in addition to what an official history later called "perhaps the most significant intelligence loss in U.S. history," it led to the creation of the National Security Agency, which under George W. Bush implemented a constellation of illegal, unconstitutional programs for warrantless domestic surveillance. It should be clear that even at that early date, CIA analysis was a sideshow to the much sexier realm of covert action.

Men like Wisner and Helms knew that public exposure of the agency's failures would mean the agency's end. Their solution, and that of their colleagues and successors, was to lie. In 1961 Johnson toured the CIA station in Berlin. The Berlin chief, Bill Graver, wowed the Vice President with stories about how many East Germans, Czechs and Poles, military officers and civilians, were snitching on the Soviet empire. "However, if you *knew* what we had," recalled Graver's subordinate Haviland Smith, "you knew that the penetration of the Polish military mission was the guy who sold newspapers on the corner," not the roster of well-placed finks peddled to a starry-eyed LBJ. The only thing more routine than lying to Congress was ignoring it. Helms, as luminous a star as the CIA ever produced, was eventually convicted of lying to Congress under oath.

All this and more is recounted in *Legacy of Ashes*, a history of the agency written by *New York Times* reporter Tim Weiner. It is not hyperbolic to say that Weiner's book is the greatest ever written about the CIA. Weiner combed through mountains of declassified material and tracked down agency veterans at all levels to produce a complex, subtle and beautifully written history. The CIA paid Weiner the ultimate inadvertent compliment by issuing a statement attempting to rebut him: "Backed by selective citations, sweeping assertions, and a fascination with the negative, Weiner overlooks, minimizes, or distorts agency achievements." If a subsequent writer produces a book about the CIA half as insightful, thorough or penetrating, he or she can be proud of the achievement.

As acerbic as his history is, Weiner is far from being an enemy of the agency; rather, he writes as a reformist, determined to bolster American power. "I hope [this book] may serve as a warning," he declares. "No republic in history has lasted longer than three hundred years, and this nation may not long endure as a great power unless it finds the eyes to see things as they are in the world. That was once the mission of the Central Intelligence Agency." Weiner is among the most respected intelligence reporters in the

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country, and his diligence and expertise make him the rare journalist who deserves his glowing reputation. During the past few months, critics have been trying to tarnish it. As *Congressional Quarterly*'s national security editor, Jeff Stein, discovered, attacks on Weiner's methods have bubbled up in "specialist journals, on the Web and in a flurry of e-mail among historians and investigative reporters." The critics—some of whom are affiliated with the agency—allege errors of fact; Weiner concedes nothing and countercharges that it's his detractors who have the facts wrong. "I think there is some fact mangling going on here," Weiner told Stein, "and I don't think I'm the one mangling."

Whatever the resolution of the debate over *Legacy of Ashes*, Melvin Goodman offers something different: *Failure of Intelligence* is an elegy for the agency he worked for as an analyst for three decades. Goodman serves a particular function to Washington national security reporters and CIA officials: he acts as an intermediary to pass messages between active-duty colleagues, who are not authorized to speak with the press without official permission, and journalists seeking to discover the agency's inner workings. When interviewing retired CIA officials, it can often be difficult to determine how much information comes from inside Langley and how much comes from the ex-officials. (To be clear: I have never spoken with Goodman.) Experienced reporters typically start by speaking with ex-officials to familiarize themselves with the intelligence community and then work their way into Langley.

Goodman believes the ravages of the Bush Administration have crippled the CIA—perhaps permanently. His primary focus is on CIA analysis. During the past eight years, the Administration has deliberately undermined the agency's independence, demanding that it produce not intelligence but pretexts for the Administration's agenda. It can be fairly objected that prior administrations exerted control over intelligence. But never in the nation's history—not even under Nixon—has an administration undermined the legitimacy of intelligence analysis. In the immediate aftermath of September 11, neoconservative Pentagon official Douglas Feith directed subordinates to comb through the CIA's raw intelligence on Iraq and Al Qaeda until they compiled enough data to make the fallacious argument that Saddam Hussein was allied with Osama bin Laden. They presented their findings to Tenet and the White House—contending to the White House in a classified briefing that the CIA's expert analysis refuting any such connection should be dismissed out of hand. Feith had perfected the "dreamwork" of Reagan-era foreign policy, "a dreamwork devised to obscure any intelligence that might trouble the dreamer," as Joan Didion described it in *Salvador*.

In February 2007, the Pentagon's inspector general released a report on the activities of Feith's constellation of intelligence efforts, collectively known as the Office of Special Plans. It stopped short of concluding that Feith had broken the law but called his activities "inappropriate." Yet the damage was done, on several fronts. Most obvious, Feith and his coterie helped drive the country into a war under false pretexts. Second, they allowed unscrupulous officials to misrepresent the judgment of the intelligence community. Long after the CIA and the FBI rejected the contention that 9/11 hijacker Mohamed Atta met with an Iraqi agent in Prague, Cheney, assisted by the disinformation produced by the Office of Special Plans, presented the evidence of the refuted meeting as ambiguous. The press, unable to adjudicate between truth and falsity because of the Vice President's manipulations, recycled the story as Cheney intended.

But the most insidious effect of the Pentagon initiative was within the CIA. Top agency officials, most importantly Tenet, a Clinton Administration holdover, chose loyalty to Bush over their duty to the CIA's independence. All CIA directors, whom the President appoints, have to perform the delicate balancing act of pleasing the President and protecting the agency, but some keep their footing better than others. Helms stopped Nixon from effectively gelding the politically inconvenient analysis directorate, for instance. During the run-up to the Iraq War, intelligence reporters could not talk to intelligence analysts on background without hearing how conformity to Administration policy was the order of the day at Langley. (Bucking a generally supine press corps, Walter Pincus of the *Washington Post* and Jonathan Landay and Warren Strobel, then working for Knight Ridder, showed more backbone than most, myself included.) Egregiously, Deputy Director for Intelligence Jamie Miscik removed the agency's Mideast analysts from an agency assessment of the purported Saddam–Al Qaeda link. She did so because those analysts considered the proposition unsupported by the facts. The resulting document, "Iraq and al-Qaeda: Interpreting a Murky Relationship," was written, she later told the Senate, to be "purposefully aggressive"—which is to say, to be a lie. Even so, the document did not satisfy Feith.

Yet the agency was clawing for self-preservation during a delicate moment. The 9/11 attacks temporarily made Bush a political giant. It took years before the press absorbed, thanks to the 9/11 Commission, that the CIA had given strategic warning to the White House in the summer of 2001 that there would be a terrorist attack. In the meantime, the standard line in the media—which Bush was eager to exploit—was that 9/11 was an intelligence failure. Tenet, a consummate careerist, decided to let the White House have its way with the Iraq intelligence. Tenet's successor, a Bush loyalist named Porter Goss, was even worse: he not only purged officials deemed politically suspect but also informed the agency in an e-mail shortly

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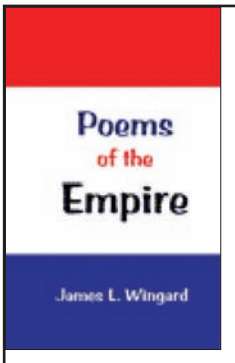


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after Bush's re-election that its job was to "support the administration and its policies in our work." It is hard to dismiss Goodman's conclusion that the agency "no longer knows how to provide truth to power and lacks the courage to do so."

Institutionally, the CIA has never been weaker. In late 2004, Congress finally passed a law separating the head of the intelligence community from the CIA, yet the law did nothing to safeguard the community's independence. The current head of US intelligence, retired Adm. Mike McConnell, has repeatedly misrepresented the intelligence community's warrantless domestic surveillance activities to Congress in order to advance the Administration's goal of removing the judicial branch from the surveillance process. McConnell has become Bush's chief lobbyist for surveillance on Capitol Hill. He has untruthfully told Congress that an Administration-backed bill allowing unfettered surveillance thwarted a terrorist plot in Germany. He constructed a bizarre and untrue story that cumbersome judicial processes delayed surveillance on an Iraqi insurgent cell that kidnapped US soldiers, when in fact the delay was attributable to bureaucratic dithering at the Justice Department and NSA. On top of that, he and the CIA's current director, Air Force Gen. Michael Hayden, have insisted on Bush's right to direct the CIA to torture people. McConnell has agreed that waterboarding—a horrifying process that either simulates or induces drowning—would be torture if applied to him, but only because of his delicate sinuses.

**The CIA's failures are failures of the impossible: to read people's minds or to predict the future.**

It is tempting to view the agency's record of failure and conclude that it's time to dismember the CIA and start again. The loudest proponents of this view come from within the neoconservative movement: Feith, ex–CIA Director Jim Woolsey and Richard Perle, to name a few. They desire two structural changes: to destroy, finally, agency analysis and to "unleash" covert action. In 1976 George H.W. Bush, then the CIA's director, acquiesced to a right-wing effort known as Team B, wherein conservative analysts replaced the CIA's judgments on the Soviet Union with their own conviction that Soviet power was robust and expanding. (Needless to say, Team B was wrong.) Abbot Smith, director of the Office of National Estimates under Nixon, told a CIA oral history, "I look upon that as almost a turning point from which everything went down." To rid the agency of its analytical function is to remove the only institutional obstacle to the triumph of Feith's dreamwork, wherein the facts must be tweaked to fit the policy. It would represent the ultimate defeat of the intelligence community's founding purpose.

Similarly, to blame the CIA for its record of operational failures is to miss the point. Covert action is a narcotic for Presidents, offering the illusory hope that they can shape the course of history merely by ordering a little cash moved around or a general assassinated or a labor union infiltrated, all without their fingerprints ever being detected. And like a narcotic, it is difficult to emerge from the abyss of covert action when in the clutches of its exhilarating high. The Bay of Pigs fiasco did not dissuade the Kennedy Administration from attempting to eliminate Castro. Instead, it led the CIA deep within the zone of amorality that Gen. Jimmy Doolittle championed back in 1954, as operatives sought help from underworld figures to plot the killing of a foreign leader. Liberal icon Robert F. Kennedy practically ran a Murder Incorporated branch out of his Justice Department office.

The most underappreciated fact about the CIA is that, for all the loose talk about preserving the agency's analytic independence, when it comes to covert action, the CIA does only what administrations tell it to do. If it surpasses the boundaries of what politicians expect it to do, that is only because those politicians do not want to know the actual costs of their desired goals—assassination, torture and kidnapping, to name a few. A case in point surrounds José Rodriguez, the former deputy director of operations who in 2005 ordered the destruction of videotaped evidence of brutal interrogations conducted by agency officials on two members of Al Qaeda in CIA custody. Rodriguez is the subject of a criminal investigation. The interrogators in question may eventually be as well. Yet the men who in 2002 ordered the CIA to go into the torture business—Bush, Cheney, Alberto Gonzales, David Addington (Cheney's chief of staff and former legal counsel) and John Yoo (a former deputy assistant attorney general in the Office of Legal Counsel at the Justice Department), principally—are not under investigation and, in all likelihood, will never be. The only man convicted of a crime connected to the CIA's new role as Bush's torture agency is a CIA contractor named David Passaro, who is serving an eight-year sentence for his role in the death of an Afghan detainee named Abdul Wali.

There are many bureaucratic changes the CIA can make to do its job somewhat better, and Richard Betts and Amy Zegart detail some of them in their new books, *Enemies of Intelligence* and *Spying Blind*, respectively. Cultivate better networks of informants around the globe. Don't think that recruiting Americans of, say, Mideastern descent is a translation or operations panacea. ("A former CIA station chief gave examples of Arab and Latino Americans whose accents and dialects gave them away when they were dispatched to the Middle East or Cuba," Betts writes. Betts, a former staff member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, has led the attack on *Legacy of Ashes*.) Harmonize the security-clearance process across the community and in law enforcement, so a CIA official can make sure a Los Angeles police officer can lawfully accept information about a terrorist flying into LAX.

But nothing fundamental will change until America decides to abandon the hegemony business. Covert action is part of the imperial cast of mind: its implicit premise is that America, by virtue of its position of dominance, has the right to recast the world according to its prerogatives. The failures of the CIA are failures, in the final analysis, of the impossible—failures to read people's minds, predict the future or determine the shape of history. Calls for "strengthening" or "unleashing" the CIA are indicative of this uncritical imperial mind-set and will forever miss the point that the agency's failures are in fact failures of policy. John McCain is a case study in misdiagnosis. The GOP presidential candidate advocates establishing a "modern day OSS [that] could draw together specialists in unconventional warfare; covert action operators; and experts in anthropology, advertising, and other relevant disciplines."

Instead, McCain should read a dispatch from thirty-three years ago. In April 1975, Henry Kissinger, in a typical fit of pique, refused to negotiate the entrance of the North Vietnamese into Saigon. Hanoi, as a result, sacked the city. It was up to the CIA's station chief, Tom Polgar, to send a final cable back to Washington as chaos overtook the South Vietnamese capital. What he wrote served as an epitaph to an American empire that did not die because of mere intellectual bankruptcy: "This will be final message from Saigon Station.... It has been a long fight and we have lost.... Those who fail to learn from history are forced to repeat it. Let us hope that we will not have another Vietnam experience and that we have learned our lesson." ■

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# Playing Politics for Laughs

by STUART KLAWANS

As the desert sun beats down on Medina Wasl—its stone-faced houses, its barren souk, its scrawny minaret casting a finger's shadow—filmmakers embedded with a battalion of the First Cavalry ride through the dusty streets, capturing the bad on its way to worse. This is *Full Battle Rattle*, in which Tony Gerber and Jesse Moss have assembled one of the most complete pictures yet to emerge of how an Iraqi town fragments into civil war, given the well-meaning but clumsy nudges of its American occupiers. It is a work of direct cinema, which like all such documentaries demands to be valued for the intense labor that went into it: the weeks of filming, the months of editing. Paradoxically, though, *Full Battle Rattle* may also be the most conveniently made of all records of US military failure in Iraq—because everything you see in it happened in just three weeks, about forty miles outside Barstow, California.

Here, in the Mojave Desert, hundreds of Iraqi-American role players live in Medina Wasl and the dozen other stage-set villages of the National Training Center at Fort Irwin. Motivated by love of their adopted country, housed in a simulation of desperate poverty and equipped with scripted backstories that would be the envy of any Method actor, the performers interact on a round-the-clock basis with Army units that are about to be deployed to Iraq and that have been sent here to find out what it will be like. *Full Battle Rattle* takes you through one such three-week training mission as seen from both sides, with Gerber living in the stage-set Army base and filming the soldiers' activities and Moss living in Medina Wasl and filming its residents. Which of the two producer-directors was responsible for filming the insurgents (played in these exercises by US soldiers rather than Iraqi-born civilians) I don't know; but whoever it was caught such niceties as the whiteboard sign hanging in jihadi headquarters, marked with a helpful reminder to attack the Army base at 4 AM.

Like any documentary about putting on a show, *Full Battle Rattle* abounds with mirth-provoking incongruities between the effect aimed for and the means used to achieve it. After a firefight in town—or, rather, a very chaotic game of laser tag—you hear an officer with a bullhorn order, "If you're a casualty, leave your bandage on," while medics rush to the triage station bearing ghastly, mutilated mannequins and assorted plastic body parts. An officer charged with making a jihadi video of an assassination coaches the insurgents to put a little more oomph into their *Allahu akbar!* and reminds the victim, with exasperation, that when he's shot he can't throw out his hands to break the fall. From time to time, when the players need refreshment, an ice cream truck rolls into the main street of Medina Wasl, tinkling its mechanical tune.

It's "surreal comedy," as more than one reviewer characterized *Full Battle Rattle* when it premiered last February at the Berlin Film Festival. Somehow, though, I don't much feel like laughing. The Iraqi role players of Medina Wasl—"deputy mayor" Bassam Kalasho, "shopkeeper" Azhar Cholagh, "deputy police chief" Nagi Moshi—break my heart when they marvel that in the off hours, when they're out of character, they get along beautifully, with no Sunni-Shiite divisions. "For real, we're family," one of them says, boasting of a harmony that scarcely seems possible now in the real Iraq but has been achieved in an imaginary one. For the Army role players, I can feel only respect and sorrow, starting with Lt. Col. Robert McLaughlin, commander of the 5-82 Battalion, who comes into the exercise fully determined to bring peace and prosperity to Medina Wasl. That is his job, and he takes it with the utmost seriousness—though the main lesson he can draw after three weeks' training is that, in reality, he probably won't be able to do it. "Am I a failure?" he asks late in the film, then answers despondently, "Actions speak louder than words." The last we see of McLaughlin, he and his soldiers are back in Texas, at Fort Bliss, getting onto an airplane bound for the real Iraq. Their kids are in costume. It's Halloween.

*Full Battle Rattle* goes into theatrical release July 9, starting with a run in New York at Film Forum.

Extensive historical analysis, conducted just the other night between Times Square and the 96th Street station, has convinced me that the model for *Get Smart* may be found in the original Ernst Lubitsch version of *To Be or Not to Be*, and more specifically in its performance by "that great, great Polish actor" Jack Benny (may his memory be for a blessing). Surely you remember the image of Benny the undercover Resistance agent, with his bland overconfidence and middle-aged mama's-boy face, his carefully erect posture and casually dismissive wife. No man was ever cast more

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poorly as a hero, and none was ever more pleased to find himself playing the part.

Some twenty years later, when Mel Brooks and Buck Henry invented the character of Maxwell Smart for television, they translated Benny's preening inadequacy from Nazi-occupied Europe to a James Bond–obsessed America. In the new era of technical sophistication and tough-guy suavity, scenes bristled with gizmos of the malfunctioning sort, and the chief protagonist, played by Don Adams, shot out syllables as if his mouth were a .38 automatic. Yet despite these changed circumstances, the leading man's speech patterns still sounded as affected as Benny's, his female counterpart (Barbara Feldon) still bested him without trying and his nemeses—the agents of the international bad-guy organization KAOS—still should have had him outmatched, not that he would have noticed. That great, great hero-by-default, as created by Lubitsch and Benny, had survived into the '60s and would go on surviving when Brooks took the Benny role in his own *To Be or Not to Be*, which he remade in the '80s—badly, alas, though not so dismally as half a dozen guys have now botched the movie version of *Get Smart*.

I could belabor the lighting (best characterized as approximate), the action sequences (assembled in an Osterizer), the sound editing (which at times obscures the dialogue, but not often enough). The ticket buyer has a right to complain; unlike spy gizmos, these mechanisms are supposed to function. But for anyone who entertained hopes for *Get Smart* and has not been entertained back, the film's main fault will lie in its wobbly translation. Director Peter Segal, writers Tom Astle and Matt Ember and their fistful of producers have altered Maxwell Smart to suit the presumed taste of today's audience but have done nothing to adapt him to today's reality.

In terms of audience, it's now assumed that people no longer want to laugh at the self-involved bumbler who doesn't deserve the girl. They want to laugh with the nice but normal-looking guy, outwardly arrogant but inwardly insecure, who's witty enough to win Anne Hathaway. That's the lesson producers have learned from the many hit comedies of Judd Apatow; and that's why the new Maxwell Smart had to be Steve Carell, star of Apatow's *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*. He's an effortlessly likable actor, who sometimes brings to mind a fretful, dimpled squirrel and arouses a comparable sympathy. At his best, as in *Little Miss Sunshine*, Carell does not just soak up kind feelings but extends them to others, drawing on an intelligence that accounts for his worried eyebrows and wary gaze. This is admirable; but it's not Maxwell Smart—and neither is it a persona that can be nourished by *Get Smart*'s pure silliness.

The TV show, though ridiculous, was not just silly. It was, rather, a gleeful assault on the absurdities that passed for seriousness in its era: the assumption that the globe had to be divided into opposing camps; the faith that superior technology would secure the West's victory; the belief that the most important work of democracy needed to be done in secret, by coolly professional men dressed like Frank Sinatra. Through his triumphant blunderings, Don Adams demolished this monstrous order on a weekly basis, much as Jack Benny before him had shown up the Aryan superman as anything but invincible. (Not such a safe proposition when *To Be or Not to Be* was released, in March 1942.) But in the *Get Smart* movie, the most credible targets of comic aggression are a mere smattering of bullying officials: a rude Vice President, a cocksure Secret Service agent. Kind, intelligent, overeager Maxwell Smart may serve as a rebuke to these figures, but when it comes to the film's larger vision of the world, I can't say he makes the threat of nuclear terrorism seem all that amusing.

> Apatow's law: we want to laugh with the normal guy, outwardly arrogant but inwardly insecure.

In fact, it's not a tenth as funny as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. That minor unpleasantness, of course, is the subject of the far superior spy comedy *You Don't Mess With the Zohan*, starring Adam Sandler—the anti-Carell, who might skin and roast a winsome little squirrel and belch with satisfaction. Extensive critical analysis has revealed to me why *Zohan* succeeds where *Smart* fails. It's not just a question of sharper direction (by Dennis Dugan, who has a Frank Tashlin–like talent for using live actors as if they were cartoon figures) or a matter of having fresher and far more plentiful jokes (written by Sandler, Robert Smigel and the inevitable Judd Apatow). The secret is hummus, hacky sack, cheap electronics stores and the descending falsetto pentatonic denial ("*No*, no no no no"). In short, the secret (don't tell the spies) is specific intelligence about the characters and their world—including the verifiable information that a great many Israelis, like the expatriated Zohan, prefer to love their country from a good, safe distance.

Yes, Sandler's heart ultimately proves to be as soft as Carell's (if not as hard-working as other parts of his anatomy); the girl falls into his arms, and peace descends upon a troubled world. But note the precondition for peace: the film's Israelis and Palestinians now live together in New York, where they find they can get along. As a remedy for the Mideast's woes, American pluralism might be slightly impractical; but as a premise for a summer comedy, it's real enough to be funny. You could even work the idea into a documentary. Look at *Full Battle Rattle*.

Kent Mackenzie's *The Exiles* is haunted by absence. Its characters—young Native Americans in Los Angeles, filmed half a century ago—had lost their land and their ancestors' way of life, without gaining much of anything except a taste for beer and rock 'n' roll. The old neighborhood where the picture was made, Bunker Hill, was already slated for demolition in 1958, when Mackenzie started the shoot; now it exists only in his images and in those of a handful of other filmmakers. *The Exiles* itself came close to disappearing. Though well received at festivals when it appeared in 1961, it never received a theatrical release but circulated only in the classroom market, eventually fading into a handful of fuzzy video dubs. And Mackenzie has been lost. He died in 1980, having managed to direct only one other feature.

*The Exiles* might have vanished entirely, like a sigh, if not for Thom Andersen and his 2003 documentary *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, which incorporated excerpts of Mackenzie's film to demonstrate how the social and physical fabric of the city had been wiped away and willfully forgotten. What was memory for Andersen became a revelation for others, prompting the distributor Milestone Film and Video to collaborate with the UCLA Film and Television Archive and the USC archive in restoring *The Exiles*.

Now the film is going into theatrical release for the first time, opening in New York July 11 at the IFC Center. The nonprofessional performers are suddenly present again, telling their stories and acting out their daily lives. The bars, shops and tenements of Bunker Hill have once more sprung into view, in glistening, nocturnal, black-and-white cinematography. It's as if someone had done a ghost dance and it worked, just a little—enough to turn your sigh into a gasp of amazement. ■

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# BACK TALK

ADRIAN BELLESGUARD

## David Levine

David Levine is the best-known caricaturist of our time, celebrated especially for his illustrations for *The New York Review of Books*, to which he contributed from the very first issue until macular degeneration forced him to forsake ink for pencil this past winter. He lives in Brooklyn, where he was born and raised. —*Christine Smallwood*

**How did you find yourself at *The New York Review of Books*?**

They found me. The man who was my art director at *Esquire* was called upon by Barbara Epstein to design the cover of the publication. All that big type, big woodblock type, was his idea. Ed Sorel told me that he had turned it down. I don't know why. I think he would have been terrific at it. We're all crazy.

**What do you think your impact has been?**

I don't mean to put this in egotistic terms, but I think, given the present number of large head and small body caricatures and so on, I think I started a run. There were things with big heads and little bodies going back to Greek and Roman times, but not that many, and not in Brooklyn. What's interesting is there's a very large range [of young caricaturists]. There are some who are just dead-on classical, but classical in the worst sense—they do something and illustrate it with details and spotlights and things like that. Caricature is a form of hopeful statement: I'm drawing this critical look at what you're doing, and I hope that you will learn something from what I'm doing.

**Is what you do different from political cartooning?**

There is a different requirement. There is a pressure on political cartoonists to do five, six and seven drawings a week. I never had anything like that as a pressure. I could take time to really look it over and think about it, read the articles and so on. The political cartoonists don't get a chance. The headlines are saying this and this about so-and-so, and you have to come up with something which is approved by an editor. I almost never had to get an approval. In forty years I may have run into a disagreement with *The New York Review* maybe two times.

**How would you like to be remembered?**

I want somebody to look at my paintings and try to put me back together. Right now most people don't know my paintings but certainly do know my caricatures. I would like it to be: he draws, he paints, he does all the things with graphic possibilities in different media, and does them well. I don't think they're going to turn the world over in any way. Somebody will not get an idea from Picasso of a sense of the species other than the fact that it's really wacko. I frequently quiet down or calm down a caricature. A young one comes and shows me work, and everything is so overdistorted that you can't recognize it as a human being. And I say that to them. Your primary thing is not to leave your species on a dump. And also not to come with a portfolio for only the rich, only the famous, only the 10-year-old little blondes who are passing for our beautiful girls. I mean this is just a very corrupt period in that sense. And I and my friends are standing for what we really love in painting and in other things, hoping.

**What did you think of the 2005 Danish cartoon controversy?**

It's basically very simple for me. Anybody should be able to say anything they damn well please. Anybody can criticize it, too. But to threaten, these things with murdering somebody… the world should stand up suddenly and say no.

**Are there artists today you particularly dislike?**

Mostly whatever they're presenting as people drawn by people in *The New Yorker*. I think they've let down the barrier of quality, and it is just terrible. Sometimes funny ideas, but I do not understand what they call cartoons anymore. It's, How well did you do it? *Why* did you do it? I came out of a radical house. The covers on the pamphlets were always of workers as great strong beasts, and the capitalists were always wide, round people who could eat most of the nation and so on. Those artists presented an image: the class struggle is still going on.

**Will caricature always be here? Is it an art for the ages?**

At one point in Middle Europe there were a great deal of anti-Semitic attacks, and a rabbi built a powerful creature called a golem out of mud. And this figure then protected the Jews. My point here is that there's always been something cartoonish that eventually became caricatures. The caricatures are drawn out of the artist when something calls. Something calls at a time of corruption and the breakdown of our democracy and all these things that we're finding—CEOs are walking away with billions and people are starving and so on. That draws something on the part of some cartoonists, who leave the cartooning and really get into discussion, as Ed Sorel does, as Jules Feiffer does and hopefully as I do, each in a little different way. In a sense it's like the golem. When things are settled, he's not needed. There's a point where it could just be entertaining. But I don't know when.

**Are you pessimistic about the future, politically speaking?**

It's either that or jump out of a building. ■

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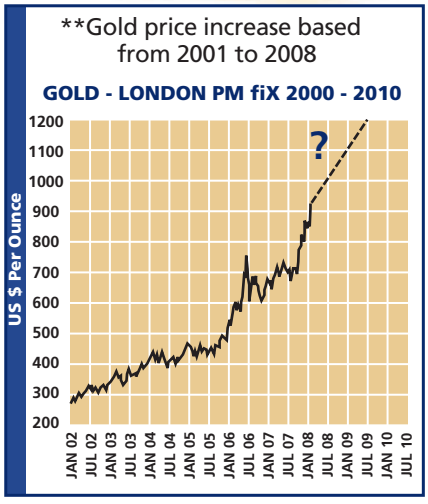


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